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THE MANGLE HOUSE

A LANCASHIRE TALE

BY

JOHN ACKWORTH

AUTHOR OF
"CLOG SHOP CHRONICLES" "BECKSIDE LIGHTS"
"DOXIE DENT" ETC. ETC.

London
CHARLES H. KELLY
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To

My Brother

(The Rev. J. W. Smith)

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THE MANGLE HOUSE

CHAPTER I

A DISCONSOLATE LOVER

THERE were more empty houses in Slagden than inhabited ones, and no new building bigger than a hencote had been erected there for nearly thirty years. It had been "summat of a place" in the old hand-loom weaving days, but the coming of machinery had sealed its fate, and so, though nobody who could live in Slagden would ever want to live anywhere else, that hard necessity which knows no law and no sentiment had driven the people forth, and they now resided in those dirty-looking, stuck-up mill villages in the valley, whose smoke reached even to Slagden itself, and reminded Saul Swindells of the sulphurous regions to which *his neighbours* were going. Slagden crowned the first shoulder of the great hill that blocked the end of the Aldershaw valley, and from the middle of the old road opposite the Mangle House you could on a very clear day see

not only Noyton, Pye Green, Longclough, and Aldershaw itself, but right away to Drillington Folly, some fourteen miles off. When the wind was in the right quarter the air of Slagden was nothing less than genuine sea air, all the way from Blackpool! As the aforesaid Saul Swindells declared, whenever the new-fangled "trips" were mentioned in his presence, "When Aw want sea air, Aw stops awhoam an' tak's it neat; noan o' your Blackpoo' hyster-shell and tripe-stall mixturs fur me." Most of the Slagdenites "bowed in the house of Rimmon" so far as to accept employment in the mill villages of the plain below, but there all intercourse with degenerate modernity ended, and Slagden kept itself severely to itself, and became quieter and more isolated every year. The "cities of the plain," Noyton, Pye Green, etc., boasted of terraces, groves, avenues, and even crescents, but stalwart Slagden stuck proudly to the older nomenclature, called its longest block of houses "Bumby's Row," and the five low cottages just above the Mangle House "Switcher's Buildings." The only public-house in the village was the "Dog and Gun," a long low structure with mullioned windows and corpulent bays. It was never open on Sundays, for its owner and keeper was the bassoon player at "th' Chapil i'th Fowt," and a very zealous though inconsistent Methodist. The only public buildings were the New School, which was, as a matter of fact, one of the oldest remaining structures, an old fourteenth-century church which was not in the village at all,

but about half a mile nearer the moors, and the Methodist chapel above mentioned, which was hidden away beyond "Bumby's Row" and down a narrow "ginnel." You entered the "ginnel" from "Chapil Fowt," and just where the latter emerged into the main or "owd" road stood an ancient pear tree, and four yards above this was the Mangle House, gable-end to the fold, but facing the road. Right across this gable-end was a rude thick plank seat supported upon old tree stumps, and it was upon this seat that the village philosophers sat to discuss the affairs of the universe, such opposition as there was gathering generally round the roots of the pear tree.

One bright, breathless Saturday afternoon two men occupied the bench—Seth Pollit, the milkman, and Saul Swindells, the schoolmaster. Saul was also the village accountant, lawyer, and literary and theological referee. He was besides a local preacher in "th' owd body." He was painfully thin, and looked much taller than he really was. Not only his garments but his limbs seemed to have been made for somebody else, and to have been obtained by their present owner second-hand. He had a big, top-heavy head, which rolled about and threatened to come off as he talked, little restless black eyes, buried under heavy overhanging crags of eyebrows, a large mouth, which never seemed to be big enough for the words he wished to use, and a domineering, contemptuous nose. His companion was a short, heavy-limbed man, with high narrow forehead, small drooping

mouth, and light blue eyes, the sockets of which seemed to have been intended for much larger optic machinery. There was scarcely a single question in life upon which these two agreed, and consequently they were inseparable lifelong friends. Seth could not have expressed himself in anything but dialect if he had wanted to, and Saul's speech was a bewildering mixture of pulpit English and homely folk-talk.

"Hay Lorjus! bud it's hot; we're bonny foo's to sit here sweltering," grumbled Seth, as he threw his new-washed corduroy waistcoat open.

"Speak for yourself. *I* should be hot if my inside was a blast furnace an' my mouth a mill chimney."

Seth's wooden face gave no sign; he only curled his forefinger round the stem of his pipe, closed his eyes sleepily, and took a long relishing pull. After a moment's meditation, however, he propped his head negligently against the gable-end, removed his pipe reluctantly, and replied, "Chewin' wod be mysterer [moister] sartinly."

Saul, with cheeks indignantly puffed, as was common with him, glared at the offensive smoke-rings, and cried pouncingly, "Chew? Why not? Them that burn the devil will eat him. Poo! P-h-e-w! take your breath o' Beelzebub away."

Now Saul loved raillery quite as much as his companion loved tobacco, but the heat, in spite of the shade of the pear tree, was so enervating that neither of them seemed to have strength

to pursue the argument, and as it was an old bone these two war-dogs were fighting over—one only unearthed when every other excuse for quarrelling failed—the conversation seemed likely to perish of inanition, and the two were subsiding into lazy silence when a door at the bottom end of the fold—the one next to the ginnel, in fact—opened, and a young fellow, evidently about thirty years of age, and dressed in decent Saturday afternoon attire, came lounging towards them. His approach was apparently of no interest whatever to the cronies, and even when he came and dropped with a sinking sigh into a cavity between the pear-tree roots they neither looked at him nor spoke. For a while the new-comer treated his companions as they had treated him, but presently wriggling himself deeper into the space between the root branches, until his knees were almost on a level with his chin, he put his arms round his legs, and clasping his hands in front of his shins, bestowed on the two men opposite an uneasy sidelong glance.

"Wor art siking theer fur?" demanded the milkman, though no sound of any kind had come from the last arrival.

He of the pear tree turned his head away, stared first at the "Dog and Gun," and then down towards the ginnel, but did not utter a word.

Seth having failed, Saul would try. Eyeing his man over with suspicious frown, he observed, "It 'ull tak' a lot o' sighs to mak' a sarmon."

"Sarmons be hanged! Aw wudna sike fur a tun a sarmons;" and the speaker went suddenly red with resentment.

Seth, the milkman, closed his eyes and gave his head a long deprecatory shake; there was no hope for a preacher who began with notions like these. Saul's little black orbs were rolling about in evident search for adequate language, and presently he set his heels to the ground, thrust his hands into his pockets and his back against the gable-end, and delivered himself thus: "Jesse, sighs an' sarmons is like t' Siamese twins, they canna be parted; if there's noa sighs i'th makkin' of a sarmon, there'll be a bonny lot i'th yerrin' on it."

It was one of the milkman's strongest points that he never under any circumstance allowed himself to manifest the slightest interest in what the schoolmaster said, and the more boisterous the pedagogue's oratory the more wooden and unconscious did he seem. As soon, therefore, as Saul had finished, and before Jesse could frame any reply, Seth interjected drawlingly, "It's oather a sarmon or a woman."

The dull red blush that rose in Jesse's neck and travelled to his brow told its own tale, and Saul, a thirty-year widower, whose short married life had been very stormy, fixed a stony glare upon the young fellow under the tree, sprang at him, hot as it was, and, thrusting a long, dingy hand under his nose, demanded fiercely, "Give me that plan."

"Wot fur?"

"Give—me—that—there—plan."

"Aw shanna! Wot fur?"

"Con thou go up a ladder by sliding down it? Con thou whitewesh a wall wi' gas tar? Con thou mak' fire an' wayter mix? Well, then! Luv and theology, sarmons an' women, 'ull noa mooar mix nor fire an' wayter."

Seth was waiting patiently for this diatribe to end, and then, after a preliminary flicker of his slovenly eyelashes, he remarked, without directly addressing the young preacher, "Why dustna ax her, an' ger it dun wi'?"

"Ax her? That's it! Aw hav' axed her!"

"Resign! Send in that plan!" thundered Saul.

"Tha has axed her? Then has hoo jack'd thi up?"

"Jacked me up? That's it! Aw wuish hoo hed."

Seth's wooden face showed just the slightest trace of surprise, his eyebrows went up a little, and his mouth corners came down; whilst Saul, now back upon the seat, began to show a passing gleam of ordinary human curiosity.

"Hoo's a bit awkkerd wi' thi, then?" remarked the milkman, with an interrogative inflection.

"Hoo's as nice as pie."

Seth's face showed genuine expression at last. With a pucker of perplexity on his brow, and a long hard stare at Jesse, he observed disappointedly, "Oh, then it's thee? Tha's changed thi mind?"

"Nay, Aw hav'na! Not me!" and Jesse jerked his head about with vigorous decision.

"This bangs Banager!" and the thoroughly excited Saul, losing sight for the moment of the theological aspect of the case, bumped his head against the gable-end, and thrust his hands deeper into his trousers. Seth was beaten, but with one last effort to grasp the situation he leaned a little forward towards Jesse and demanded, "Dust coourt her gradely? Wenches conna ston' hanky-panky wark, tha knows."

"Aw goos ivery neet."

A groan, intended to express the hopelessness of the case from the theological standpoint, escaped Saul, and Seth, staring hard at the trunk of the pear tree, poured forth huge volumes of smoke, and then remarked, in a hopeless, resigned sort of way, "Haa dust goo on wi' her? doos hoo walk aat wi' thee?"

With sad, solemn emphasis, Jesse jerked out, "That's it! hoo doesna."

"Wot does hoo dew, then?"

"Hoo axes me t' turn th' mangle."

Saul burst into a great roar of laughter, and Seth shut his eyes sharply, but with treacherous twitchings about the mouth corners. He waited a little, until he could control his voice and reduce his face to its normal woodenness, and then he asked softly, "An' wot then?"

"Then? Why, Aw turns it fur sure."

"Well?"

"An' then hoo axes me t' turn it ageean."

"An' then wot?"

"Aw turns it. An' then hoo smiles at me, and puts her yed 'o one side like that (suiting the action to the word), an' hoo says, 'Just wun mooar basketful, Jesse.' An' Aw does."

"Aw neet?"

"Aw neet—partly wot."

The muscles of risibility seem to have been left out of Seth's make-up, and so on those rare occasions when he wanted to grin he pulled his small mouth aside, like a costermonger at his calling, lugged the corner of it painfully up towards his left ear, and presented the appearance of a man who was wrestling with a frantic tooth-ache. Tic-doloureux seemed to have attacked him suddenly at this point, tears even began to roll down his cheeks; only there was a light, uncommonly like laughter, shining through them. Saul, whose amusement had changed into indignant jealousy for the honour of his sex, made a savage grab at the man next to him, and shouted, "Seth Pollit, wheer's your men? The sex is hextinct! We're all mollycoddles an' John-Mary-Anns now."

"Mollycoddles! Ay!" and Jesse's homely face was flushed with shame and resentment. "Mon, Aw'd turn it neet an' day if hoo'd let me; hoo's killin' hersel';" and then, as he dropped back against the tree, he added sighingly, "It's no' that."

Seth, the picture of vacancy, half opened his eyes at the last sentence, and then, after a

moment's musing contemplation of Jesse's face, he asked, "Is ther' summat else, then?"

"Ay is there! Bud it's nor her; it's *him*."

"Owd Nat?"

"Ay; he'll pizen me afoor he's dun. My inside's loike a doctor's shop this varry minute."

Saul was gripping the edge of the bench to suppress his rising wrath, and though the milkman's face was as solid as a block of stone, he was shaking with convulsions of internal laughter.

"Does t' mean as he mak's thi tak' his yarbs?" he asked with a trembling voice, and a prodigious effort at self-control.

"Ay does he! Quarts on 'em, an' pills, an' pumaytum."

It was no use; the eyes of the two cronies met for an instant, and then wrath and scorn and sympathy alike were swept before an irresistible sense of the ridiculous, and whilst Saul awoke the echoes with a long roar, Seth was wrestling with a most sudden and furious attack of dental agony, and emitted a series of smothered gurgles which represented the best he was capable of in the way of merriment. Suddenly, however, his face straightened, and, pulling himself up with hasty seriousness, he asked, "But tha doesn't tak' pumaytum?"

"Aw wuish Aw did! Aw'd sooner hev it in me nor on me—lewk here!" And lugging off his cloth cap, he exposed a head of hair all glued together with some greasy shining unguent, and

smelling strongly of bergamot. Poor Jesse had evidently borne his persecutions as long as he could silently, and now having broken out, intended to get all the relief possible from a full disclosure, and so, before either of his odd confidants could reply, he went on protestingly, "It's Cumfrey one neet, and knitbone another, an' Tansy or Tormental th' next. It's sickenin'! Aw'st be fun' deead i' mi bed sum foine mornin'."

"An' serve thee right! Nobody but a love-sick ninnyhommer 'ud stand it."

Saul's words were scornful enough, but his twinkling eyes and smirking mouth betrayed him, and at length Jesse, angry at being laughed at, snarled, "Ha' sum sense, will yo'! If Aw didn't tak' 'em, hoo'd ha' ta dew. He says he mun ha' sumbry to practise on; th' poor wench uset tak' 'em aw, tin Aw turnt up."

Saul's eyebrows went up, and he became a picture of weary disdain; and Seth, of the expressionless face, twice turned his light eyes to the young lover with evident questions in them, but when at last he spoke it was upon a new aspect of the case.

"Does hoo cum wi' thi when tha's dun turnin'?"

"Wi' me? Neaw that's it! Hoo just ston's at t'other end o'th mangle, an' nods her yed, an' says, 'Good-neet, lad'! Mon! Aw've niver wunce 'hed a kiss off her yet!"

"An' this is courtin'! This is modern luv-makin'! This is pluck an' independence!" and

Saul's strong upper lip was curled in loftiest scorn. "Thou numskull! Can't tha see as th' little besom's foolin' thi?"

Jesse looked as though he thought that very likely indeed, and the woebegone expression on his face deepened, but he did not reply.

The log-faced milk dealer eyed him over with musing interest for a moment, and then remarked pityingly, "This job wants oather mendin' or endin'."

"Mendin'! Aw'd see th' jade at Hanover afoor Aw'd bother wi' her! An' thee startin' 'o preichin', tew," added Saul fiercely.

Jesse coloured, bit his lip, looked from Seth to Saul, and Saul back to Seth, stared up at the Mangle House chimney, whilst his brown eyes began to swim, and then, struggling hopelessly to keep back the shameful tears, he cried, through stammering lips, "Ay, it's yessay talking, bud Aw —Aw—Aw—loike her!"

There were two or three moments of embarassing silence, and suddenly Seth rose, took a stride towards the disconsolate lover, and bending down, and dropping his voice so that Saul could not hear, he asked, "Does th' owd chap borra brass off thi?"

Jesse blushed to the eyes, tried to evade the look fixed too searchingly upon him, and then cried with clumsily simulated indignation, "Me? Neaw! Why should he? They're weel off, arna they?"

Seth's face was unfathomable, but as he still

gazed down on his victim he said, "Tha'rt a poor liar, Jesse. Tak cur o' thysel'; they're foolin' thi;" and then, turning away, he stepped to the edge of the road, glanced up it and then down, and just as he was turning back towards his seat he muttered a sentence that would have been incomprehensible to the others had they heard it, "Number fower—the little besom!"

CHAPTER II

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

THE Mangle House, at the gable-end of which the discussions of the last chapter took place, faced the old road, and was a low stone structure with a flag roof and four rooms. The lower storey was divided down the middle by a passage which went through from the front door to the back. There was a stone table near the front door, whilst the other opened into a carefully tended back garden. The room nearest to the fold corner was a herbalist's shop, which smelt strongly of aromatic simples, and the other was the mangling-room and house-place. As the herbalist had a great local reputation in a time and amongst a people much addicted to "natural" remedies, and the mangle was the only one in the village, the house was well known in the locality, and often, as the landlord of the "Dog and Gun" admitted, had more customers than his own comfortable place of resort; and this in spite of the notorious fact that the "quack doctor" and his daughter were self-contained and "stand-offish" sort of folk, who looked down on even

their best customers. That they were well-off when they left the grazing farm in Jinny Lane and "retired" to the Mangle House was perfectly well known, and that their present double-barrelled business more than kept them was equally clear, and yet they lived meanly, screwed and scraped in every possible way, and had become by-words of nipping miserliness. "Scratters?" why, couldn't Saul the schoolmaster tell you that the old herbalist had once tried to manufacture snuff out of ground roots, and didn't everybody know that on the rare occasions when old Nat did condescend to sit in the gable-end Parliament he brought a pipe made out of a wooden bowl and a clay churchwarden stem, and smoked "nasty stinkin' stuff that wasn't bacca at all, but dried yarrow"?

Nat was a tall, gentlemanly-looking old man, with large open features, wandering dreamy eyes, pale complexion, and a singularly strong-looking mouth, that contradicted the impression of weakness given by the rest of his face. He invariably wore a long loose overcoat, a black skull-cap, and Wellington boots. He was a local preacher, and had once enjoyed an almost phenomenal reputation; but when he retired from the farm he retired from the pulpit too, and now only preached very occasionally. He never took ordinary appointments, but his reputation was so great, and his pulpit power so extraordinary, that ambitious Sunday-school managers were willing to fee him if he would serve them at

anniversaries, and that he took these, and only these, engagements was confirmatory evidence, if any had been needed, of his grasping, greedy disposition. The gable-end senators were agreed that Milly, the herbalist's daughter, would have been a "stunner" if only she had been better fed. She had fine features, wonderful dark grey eyes, a white broad forehead, which was fully displayed by her curious habit of throwing her dark brown hair back without a parting, and a good but somewhat satirical mouth. Of medium height and dignified carriage, she ought to have been beautiful, and sometimes was, but poor feeding kept her pinched-looking, and her skin was almost sallow; whilst the little tinge of colour which was necessary to complete her claim to prettiness never appeared except when she blushed, and then it was overdone. She was clever and hard-working, and her house was always fastidiously clean, but her almost unnaturally high spirits and her formidable gift of speech caused her to be more feared than respected by her neighbours. This notwithstanding, the Slagden young men were always willing to take the family mangling to her, and there were always two or more of them, as Saul phrased it, "snuffin' about th' Mangle House door," but this, of course, was because, at her father's death, she would be the richest woman in the village. At the time our story opens Jesse Bentley seemed to be the favoured candidate, but as he was the steadiest lad in the neighbourhood, and had escaped female

blandishments up to the mature age of thirty, and was just about to redeem the intellectual reputation of Slagden by "Comin' on th' Plan," Seth, Saul, and the other chapel authorities viewed his untimely infatuation with disappointment and alarm; for when a quiet, deep-natured fellow like him got under the spell of a witch like Milly Scholes, it was, as the milkman put it, "Dicky Pink wi' preichin' or owt else as is sensible."

About four hours after the conversation recorded in the previous chapter, and when the gable-end bench was full of villagers, and the conversation busy, the door of the Mangle House was cautiously opened a little, and Milly, dressed for a walk, peeped nervously out. She waited a moment, with the door in her hand, stepped back and nearly closed it; reappeared with an old basket on her arm, glanced suspiciously towards the gable-end, noiselessly closed the door, crept close against the side of the house in the opposite direction to the fold, hesitated, darted across the old road, and disappeared unnoticed down Grey Mare Lane.

She wore a little tight-fitting hat, too warm and heavy for the time of year, and a long cloak very much the worse for wear, whilst the trim lines of her figure were broken somewhat in front and gave palpable signs of the presence of a concealed but inconveniently bulky parcel. She stopped now and again in the lane to cover her retreat by appearing to gather tufts of dandelion and burdock, but as soon as she was really out of

sight of the village she put her old knife into the basket, and began to walk briskly along the road. She had a wearied air, and the hidden parcel evidently incommoded her. It was an old, deep-rutted, bramble-grown lane, which widened out here and there, providing pasture for stray cattle and sly corners for rustic lovers. She was evidently very tired, and somewhat impatient to get along, and so she turned aside at the next "bay" in the lane, and began to unbutton her cloak, with the intention of transferring the parcel underneath it to her basket.

"M-i-l-l-y!"

It went through her like a bolt; a sudden shock, a piteous, gasping cry, a moment of intense internal effort, and then she raised herself, cool, collected, and saucy.

"Hay, Davit, dunna sit there loike that; tha looks loike a broody hen on a pot egg!"

The person thus addressed sat on a gate in the far corner of the opening, with his legs tucked under him, and hooked by the toes to the second rail. He was carving a "Whissun stick" when he caught sight of her, but the surprise and curiosity expressed in his use of her name were swept away before the swift attack made on his weakest point—his personal vanity. He sprang self-consciously down from his undignified perch, and strode awkwardly towards her, adjusting his tie and pulling down his very fancy waistcoat; and as he approached he said sulkily, "Aw'm bet-ter lewkin' nor gawky Jesse Bentley onyway. Wheer art goin'?"

"Ay! Well, Aw've ne'er seen him cocked up on a five-barred gate loike a duck tryin' to peerch; bud he con lick thee at mangling, Davit."

"Ler him mangle! Aw'st dew no moor, Aw con tell thi!"

"Chonce is a foine thing! Tha'd rayther sit on a rail loike a tom-tit on a pump handle, Aw reacon. Jesse is a rare turner."

David was a light-complexioned, warm-tempered young fellow, but as he dared not provoke her he replied snarlingly, "Ther's noa woman i' thee, Milly! Tha curs nowt about felleys, nobbut to turn yond owd mangle."

"Well, it's toime sumbry fun' a gradely use for 'em! They'n bin i'th rooad lung enuff."

He stared at her with a sense of exasperation, and then, devouring her placid, mock-modest face, he cried, "That tongue o' thoine 'ull be thi ruin sum day; tha'd aggravate a saint," and fairly conquered by her demure look and downcast eyes, he broke down and cried pleadingly, "Gi' me anuther chonce, wilta, wench?"

She was the picture of gentle, yielding modesty, with her head on one side and her eyes cast down, and a man who did not know her might have been tempted to catch her in his arms; but David had experience, and so he eyed her with more of suspicion than hope. She sighed a little, drooped her head languishingly, slowly raised her eyes, and looking him over deliberately, as though she were pronouncing some sad but inevitable doom upon him, she said, "Tha doesn't turn steady enough

yet, Davit—fur a mangler," and before he could grasp what she was after she had dodged lightly past him, and was tripping sedately down the lane.

David's language, Methodist though he was, was not fit to print in a respectable story. He ground his teeth, drove his heel savagely into the soft soil, and stared after her in dull, lumpish disgust. His eyes were fixed on the road she had taken even after she had vanished, and he was just turning to move towards Slagden when he pulled up and cried, in sudden curiosity, "Wheer the hangment is hoo goin'?"

He resumed his walk presently, but in a slow, dubitative manner, and after a few steps he stopped again. "Aw've seen her cum this rooad of a Setterday neet afoor; wheer *does* hoo goo?" Another fit of uneasy hesitation, another long stare down the road, and then, with sudden resolution, he darted after her, crying to himself as he did so, "Aw *will* foind it aat! Aw'll bottom this, chuse wot it cosses me."

In less than five minutes he had her in sight again, but as she stopped every now and again and looked cautiously round her, he found it necessary to be careful and keep out of sight. As they went on thus he began to put things together. She had evidently a very definite errand, and therefore the herb basket was a mere blind. She was going away from the moor edge and the places where herbs were to be obtained, and taking the direction—roundabout and secret,

but none the less sure—to one of the villages in the valley. But, if so, why? Why had she not taken the direct and much easier highway? She worked much too hard to want a walk for its own sake, and she was going too fast for a person taking the fresh air. Of course! She was going shopping, that was what the basket meant; she was walking two or three miles and robbing the village shopkeeper just to save a copper or two by getting her groceries at a cheap store in one of the villages. He had nearly abandoned the pursuit at this point in sheer disgust at her niggardliness, but the girl on before did not turn down at the lane-end to go to Noyton, as he expected; she crossed the road and went a little higher up, and finally took the old lane that carried her along the hillside; and as he watched her thus extending her trip he frowned at the thorn hedge behind which he was studying her movements and gave vent to a prolonged, amazed "Whew!" There was something very curious about all this, and many an uncanny little story of what the Scholeses had done to save a copper came into his mind as he doggedly followed her. Another twenty minutes' walk and David, perspiring with heat and growing curiosity, noticed now that Milly had taken the Pye Green Lane and was making unquestionably towards that most disreputable of all pit villages. There was a small but very noisy market held here, he now remembered, on Saturday evenings, but every Slagdenite believed that the butcher's meat there offered for

sale was indubitable "slink," and poor even at that. Milly, screw though she might be, was proverbially dainty; what on earth was she coming here for? Into the village she plunged, however, though knots of gossiping females stared rudely at her, and drunken men flung filthy words or plucked at her cloak as she passed. David's blood began to boil and his fingers to tingle, but he dare not draw nearer lest she saw him. When she came to the "Croft," where half a dozen bawling butchers were making miniature bedlam, she took a sudden turn and darted down an evil-smelling back street, and her pursuer thought for the moment he had lost her.

When he reached the corner, however, he was only just in time to jump back; she was standing not three yards away and taking something from under her cloak, and he must have been observed if he had not pulled up. Peeping cautiously round the corner, he saw her glance suspiciously about her, but when he took the next look, good gracious, she was gone! The street was empty, and she had vanished as completely as though she had dropped into the earth. Then he drew his breath and steadied himself; she had entered, of course, one of the many cottages whose back doors opened into the street. Well, he would wait: he would get to the bottom of this whatever it cost. Seven or eight minutes passed, he dare not go into the street lest she discovered him. Perhaps she had only—— Ah, there she was! coming hastily out of a ginnel he had not previously noticed, and

he had to scurry away lest she should see him. He had only time to hide behind a tipped-up coal cart when she appeared, but where was her parcel? She passed within a few yards of him, hurried out of the street, skirted the edge of the market, crossed the road, and vanished up the lane the way she had come. But now he was clear of her, Milly became for the moment of secondary interest; where had she been? He was not going to have this long hot walk for nothing. The questions were, where had she been? and what had she done with that parcel? She had never got a mangling customer all this distance away. He moved as easily as he could from behind the cart, strolled down the street towards the entry, looked round to see that nobody was watching him as he approached, and then, glancing hastily down the entry, he staggered back in sheer stupefied amazement and cried, "Good Lord, a pop shop!"

. . . . . .

Late that same night old Nat Scholes sat in his arm-chair, with his elbow on a little table, his head leaning on his hand, and dejection, anxiety, and the sickness of hope deferred in his face as he looked in sorrowful abstraction at the little pile of coppers and small silver, which, in spite of Jesse Bentley's reckless wholesale order for a dozen boxes of pomatum, only amounted to some three shillings. Milly, though ostensibly engaged in domestic duties, was watching him with wistful, anxious face, but neither of them spoke.

There was a knock at the door, and, according to strict Slagden custom, the visitor entered without waiting to be asked. It was Jesse Bentley. Milly eyed him over curiously as he walked to the proffered seat and sat down opposite her father. The old man sat up and tried to look more at his ease, whilst his daughter retreated behind his chair, but glanced pityingly at Jesse's grease-saturated hair. The lover sighed a little, twirled his hat round, glanced timidly at the herbalist, and then ventured, "They'n stuck my name upo' th' plan, Nathaniel."

"Ay, Aw see they have; it's a great honour."

Another pause, another series of hat twirlings, a desperate look around, and then the new-comer blurted out, "Aw'st mak' a bonny mess on it! Wot dew Aw know abaat preichin'?"

"Oh, cheer up; tha'll larn," said old Nat; but Milly looked anything but hopeful. "There's noa preichers loike th' owd uns," she said at length, and a new strange beauty Jesse had never seen before came into her face as she noted the effect of her words on her parent.

"Aw mun get sumbry to help me, that's wot Aw mun dew;" and Jesse took another rambling look around, as though he expected to find the assistance somewhere on the shelves.

He had evidently intended this for some sort of a hint, but as it was not taken up he threw one arm out upon the table, and stretching it towards the old herbalist he cried, "Seeyo', Nathaniel, Aw'd give aw as Aw hev i' th' wold if Aw could preich loike yo'!"

Milly looked for a brief moment as though she were going to kiss him, and then she said demurely, "Saul Swindells 'ud larn thi hard enough."

"Aw dunnat want him, he's so bullockin'; Aw want sumbry to larn me to preich as *con* preich."

Milly was baptizing him with grateful light from her eyes, only he did not notice it: she leaned forward and gave her father a gentle nudge. The old man hesitated and sighed, and then, shaking his head wearily, replied, "Aw'm tew owd fur that soort o' thing."

The eager, delighted Jesse made a gesture of repudiation. "Owd! why yo're just i' your prime! Aw could preich loike a Punshon if you'd teich me. Seeyo', Nathaniel, if yo'd larn me, Aw'd *pay* yo' for it!"

The old man shrank back as though he had been struck, and those great grey eyes watching Jesse and blessing him for his sweet flattery of her father, suddenly filled with alarm, suspicion and cold anger.

Jesse, however, saw nothing, but intent upon his object went on, "Aw'll pay yo' hawf a craan a wik till Aw get on th' full plan, if yo'll tackle me."

Nat hesitated; the compliment implied in this urgency was sweet to his sore, heavy heart, but the mercenary element in the proposal was revolting to him. Jesse, however, grew quite eloquent, and urged his plea again and again; but presently he was conscious that Milly was studying him, and his courage entirely failed.

After several minutes more of argument and hesitation, the old herbalist at last consented to undertake the task, temporarily, but hoped that the money question would not be named again. But he said it with a long sigh, and Jesse, knowing the old man's weakness, insisted that it should be as he had proposed, and then rose to go. The uneasy lover felt embarrassed and ashamed, for Milly's eyes seemed to haunt him everywhere. He had intended to put the matter very delicately, and lo! he had hurt and offended them both. He had reached the door by this time, and Milly followed to let him out. With the "sneck" in his hand he paused to whisper to her that she must be his friend with the old man, but she looked at him with hard, expressionless eyes, and never spoke. His heart sank; a great idea had been suggested to him by Seth Pollit, and he had muddled it all. He stepped out into the shadow, and was turning to say "Good-night," when a pair of white arms were flung round his neck, a wet cheek was pressed hastily against his, a flying kiss touched for a blissful second his lips, and before he could comprehend what was happening, he was pushed out into the silent road, and the door was shut.

CHAPTER III

SAUL ON SLANDER

FOR a man who had just come out of a pulpit Saul Swindells was in a very bad temper. Whatever their impression on his hearers, his sermons always uplifted and transfigured him, *pro tem.*, and he had descended from the pulpit on that, as on other occasions, with the uplifted, far-away look and solemnly benignant manner which became a man who had just raised his fellows to the seventh heaven. In mood much too lofty for frivolous vestry gossip, and sensitive modesty that fled before such fulsome compliments as his great effort had certainly evoked, he had descended the winding pulpit staircase, silently and swiftly crossed the vestry floor, snatched his hat from its peg, and fled the spot; in much the same manner as Joseph had escaped from his tempter. It did not become him either to join any of the little groups moving up the ginnel and along the fold; for their minds and tongues were of course engaged upon the great discourse they had just heard, and it was impossible but that some stray word of warm appreciation should inadvertently slip out to the peril of his soul. Naturally voluble and demon-

strative, he was usually chief speaker in the after-sermon debates at the Mangle House gable-end; but to-night, of course, if he would escape being "puffed up," he must eschew the danger, and so, with head thrown back, hands clasped behind, and eyes in the clouds, he stalked through the little throng without speaking, or even nodding, hastily turned the corner, and pressed on to his own solitary dwelling. Safe away from moral danger, however, his pace slackened, the loftiness of his look faded, and in its place came a vague dissatisfaction, which gradually deepened into unmistakable disgust; until by the time he had reached the gate of his odd-looking, tall cottage, his upper lip and even the ridge of his prominent nose were puckered with scornful discontent.

Saul had three distinct causes of vexation. First, when old Maggie o' th' pump died, she left a small legacy to purchase a new Bible and hymn-book for the chapel. That was about nine months ago, and the volumes had been introduced with a solemn "opening service" and were now in regular use. But when he reached the pulpit that night he found that the old service-books had been substituted!—a mean, underhand reflection upon his well-known habit of emphasising his arguments with lusty thumps upon the Bible, using the hymn-book as a sort of theological sledge-hammer. Offence number one. Saul had long since ceased to make new sermons, or even to improve the old ones, and this latter for the very cogent reason that they were not capable of it; but for once, as a concession to the

fastidiousness of the Slagdenites where local talent was concerned, he had gone out of his way to give a good old discourse a new introduction, an anecdote which he had never used before in *that* sermon, and a fresh peroration, which was crowned with a verbatim extract from "Watson's Institutes." With what result? Talk about casting pearls before swine? Why, although the congregation was much given to oral comment and accompanied some quite indifferent sermons with a running fire of responses, and though he had challenged directly and by name not only Billy Whiffle, who was generally inconveniently demonstrative, but Nat Scholes, the great authority on sermons himself, neither they nor any one else had uttered so much as one solitary "Amen." These things were hard enough to bear, and the rude action of the aforesaid Billy, who used in the chapel a big Bible almost as large as the pulpit one, and who closed it with an audible and peculiarly significant bang ten minutes before the preacher had done, did not mend matters. But the great affront has yet to be told. Saul had seen with a stern effort at humility when the new plan came out that he was appointed to make the Quarterly collection, but just as he was going into the pulpit he was informed that the "Quarterly" would be put off until the following Sunday, as the cold-blooded junior steward put it, "to mak' sure on it."

The Slagdenites were the hardest, most jealous and ungrateful people in a hard, envious world!

Saul's house, unlike every other building in the neighbourhood, was tall and narrow, and stood by itself at the village end of a neglected, overgrown garden. There was a patch of shrubbery about three yards by two in front, as overgrown as the rest, and the door of the cottage was protected by a drunken-looking lattice porch, now covered in riotous profusion with climbing roses and honeysuckle. As Saul entered he gave a minatory sort of cough, relieved himself of Sunday coat and top hat, assumed a dingy brown holland jacket, and arming himself with "Watson's Institutes," settled down finally in the corner of the little porch to brood over his wrongs. A little, odd-looking, deformed girl, apparently between seventeen and eighteen, brought him his invariable supper of oatcake and milk, and he glared at her as though she had served him with a jury summons, until, supremely indifferent to both the man and his ways, she retired indoors again.

Ten moody minutes passed, and Saul, whose body was on one bench and his legs on the opposite one, cast a relenting glance upon the milk, and was just stretching out his hand to appropriate a piece of cake, when he checked himself, held his breath, and listened. There were footsteps in the lane. Yes! No! Yes, it was not a mere passer-by, but somebody coming towards the house; and as soon as this was clear to him the schoolmaster settled himself farther back in the corner of the bench, and with

his back towards the village, composed his features into an expression of half-contemptuous indifference, and commenced to turn over the pages of "Watson." Somebody benefited by his evening's discourse was coming to offer the natural but dangerous incense of gratitude, and he must be on his guard against these "wiles of the devil." The footsteps came nearer and then ceased, and Saul, with his eyes glued to the book in ostentatious unconsciousness, apparently neither saw nor heard.

"Ramming th' owd gun agean, Aw see, mestur."

The visitor was leaning negligently upon the rickety garden gate and staring hard at a pair of old Wellington boots and the outer edge of a book, which were all of the schoolmaster he could see.

"An' mooar foo' me."

This was not very encouraging, but David Brooks knew his man and had come with a very decided purpose, and so he rejoined meekly and with solemn wonder in his voice, "They tell me as yed-wark's varry tryin' fur t' systum."

The face behind the honeysuckle relaxed somewhat, but as David could not see it, he had to pick his way carefully. Waiting a moment for the reply that did not come, he remarked admiringly, "Ther' wur a seet o' brain-wark i' yond sarmon. Mon! it fair floored th' gable-enders."

"Th' gable-enders!"

The exclamation was the very quintessence of contempt, and as he made it Saul sprang to his

feet, and using his book to emphasise his statement, he went on, "Sithi, Davit! them jockeys knows as mitch abaat sarmons as Aw know abaat —abaat—abaat owt."

This dismal anti-climax, brought about by the schoolmaster's inability to find any subject on which he would have been willing to admit ignorance sufficiently complete to crown the comparison, rather dashed him, and so he sank back into his seat and added sulkily, "That gate's no' locked as Aw know on."

As this was the nearest approach to an invitation to enter that he was likely to get, David grinned, glanced bashfully up and down the road, sidled into the garden, and leaning his back against the gate, blurted out, "There's noa sooapy cat-lickin' abaat yo', Saul; but Aw'd rayther yer yo' nor Dr. Punshon ony day."

The mendacious extravagance of this compliment would have defeated its purpose in most cases, but David knew his man, and accompanied his statement with a frown of immovable conviction.

The schoolmaster shook his head in that modest deprecation which he felt the situation required, and then, thrusting his head back amongst the leaves to conceal the tell-tale complacency of his looks, he placed the open volume on his shiny knee, and drawled indulgently, "Th' Doctor's a rare hand at langwidge, reet enuff; but he's rather short o' bant. Naa wot we wanten i' these days is *bant*; hideas, tha knows, p'ints—artna goin' t' sit thi daan?"

This second invitation was so very exceptional, and promised so well for David's errand, that he blushed as he dropped into the seat opposite the schoolmaster, and then, speaking under a most evident sense of gratitude and appreciation, he knitted his brows, tapped Saul on the knee, and said, with the emphasis of irresistible conviction, "Saul! ther's mooar p'ints i' wun o' yore sarmons nor ther' is i' twenty o' owd Nat's."

Saul, inwardly glowing with elation, put on a severely judicial expression, and assuming the air of one determined at all costs and in spite of strong temptation to be perfectly fair, weighed his companion's words slowly over, and then, putting his head consideringly on one side, he replied, "Nat's a sooart of a *way* wi' him, an' he's pop'ler wi' th' riff-raff; bud Aw've yerd him toime an' toime ageean, an' when Aw yers Nat Aw says wun thing to mysel' o'er an o'er ageean."

"Wot's that?"

"Aw sits i'th corner o' my pew, an' Aw listens an' listens, an' Aw says, Saul Swindills, Aw says, *He's short o' bobbins*."

David threw his head back and his mouth open in a loud but not very natural laugh. "By gum, Saul, yo' licken aw! That ticks him off to a T;" and then, with rapid change of countenance and sudden seriousness, he leaned forward, tapped the back of "Watson," and added, "Bud, Saul, wot abaat preichin' fur looaves an' fishes?"

But, to David's disappointment, Saul showed no interest in this aspect of the case; he was staring

hard at the top of a flowering currant and blinking his eyes rapidly in intense thought, and presently he said, "Nat's preichin's fur owd women o' booath sects—an' childer; he mak's 'em skrike, an' when th' tears rowls off ther noose-ends they feel religious—he's a reg'ler deggin' can!"

David had heard such statements from the same source many a time before, but he now put on a look of astonished admiration, and then tried to get his own point in by remarking, "Yo're reet, Saul! Just fancy a chap workin' poor folks' feelin's up loike he does, just fur brass: it's sickenin'!"

David put as much significance into his use of the word "brass" as he could, but somehow Saul was not curious, but continued his musings without reply. His companion watched him narrowly but with growing restlessness; it was no use, he must come to close quarters, he saw; and so, bending forward and dropping his voice into mysterious confidence, he said, "They tell me as th' owd codger gets a solid haaf-guinea ivery toime he preiches—an' sumtoimes mooar."

But this was a miss-hit; the preacher in Saul Swindells was always stronger than the man, and so the only answer David got was a drawling "It's a poor sarmon as isna wo'th mooar nor a guinea."

"Ay, bud there's sarmons an' sarmons! If owd Nat's is wo'th a guinea, th' discourse wee'n hed to-neet's wo'th twenty!"

Saul relaxed again, his strong face glowed complacently behind a thin veil of modesty, and

so, seeing his advantage, David resumed, "Aw think as *sum* 'locals' should be paid, but not scrattin' owd split-fardin's like Nat; why, mon, they tell me he's wo'th hunderds and hunderds!"

Saul appeared a little weary; this branch of the subject did not interest him at all, and his companion, whose mind was big with a disclosure he was dying to make to some one, watched him furtively as he put forth his hand, groped for the milk basin, and took an absent sort of "swig" at it.

"Yo' con say wot yo'n a moind, bud Aw dunna believe as th' owd scratter *is* rich;" and David gave the schoolmaster an expressive and significant slap on the knee.

This incitement to curiosity was so direct and palpable that anybody else would have been affected by it, and Saul was more inquisitive than most people, but he only crossed his legs, opened a cavernous mouth in vast yawns, and then replied, with lazy indifference, "Aw noather know nor cur—bud he conna be poor."

"Aw tell thi he is poor, Aw *know*; Aw dunna carry tew een i' mi yed fur nowt."

There was that in David's tones which would have awakened curiosity in a statue almost, and though Saul was still indifferent, his combative instincts were beginning to stir, and so, with a gleam of returning animation, he said, "Ger aat; has noabry ony een bud thee?"

On the right track at last, the wily David sat forward, held out his arms, and ticking off his

words on his finger-ends he said, "Saul! yo' gable-enders says he's rich; yo' caw me a bermyed, bud Aw sniffs, an' Aw snuffs, an' Aw skens abaat, an' Aw say as he's *poor*, an' Aw con prove it!"

There was a momentary flash in the eyes behind the honeysuckle, but whether it was interest awakening at last or some other sign David could not decide. It was gone, however, in an instant, and the eager secret-bearer was astonished to hear himself addressed in a tone that was conciliation and encouragement too. "Ay, tha wur allis a sly owd fox, Davit."

The compliment was equivocal, but as there was at any rate most palpable invitation to proceed in it, David chose to disregard the doubtful point, and said, "Saul, Nat Scholes is as poor as a church maase—an' poorer!"

"Bud, mon! th' manglin' mooar nor keeps 'em!"

"Aw tells thi the'r' poor."

"An' yarbs cosses nowt."

"The'r' poor!"

"Haa con they be? Wheer's th' intrist o'th brass they geet when they sowd up at th' farm?"

The tone of these questions was that of gentle expostulation, but there was a glint in Saul's eyes that was in most striking disagreement with his soft speeches had David only observed it.

"Aw tell thi the'r' poor! Aw'm no' talkin' off th' bewk; Aw know."

Saul breathed a long dubious sigh, and shook his head with a mistrustfulness that was a little

too elaborate for reality. But David was now in full cry, and it would have taken signs much more palpable to have checked him, and so, putting an impressive hand on each of Saul's knees, and peering up into his face in a vain attempt to read it as he spoke, he dropped his voice into a portentous whisper and said, "Saul, Aw wodna tell onybody else for a fortin, bud *Aw've fun' summat aat.*"

The pedagogue was engaged in a desperate effort to keep all expression out of his face, and so did not reply. David studied him dubiously, wishing as he did so that he could see his face more clearly; and then he went on, "Tha knows as Aw put up to yond powsement of a Milly, a while back."

Suddenly still as death, Saul did not open his eyes.

"An' tha knows as hoo daddlet me an' daddlet me on, an' made me turn th' mangle."

Saul had apparently stopped breathing.

"An' then hoo chucked me."

No reply.

"Well, Aw said Aw'd sarve her aat; Aw've bin squintin' an' nooasin' on her track, an' Aw've seen summat."

That queer suspicious glint came again into the schoolmaster's eye, and an almost imperceptible twitch to his mouth corner, but it passed instantly, and he sat still as a statue.

"An' Aw watchet her an' watchet her, an' last neet Aw follered her daan Grey Mare Loan."

Saul's jaw had dropped a little, but except for that he might have been asleep, or even dead.

"An' hoo sniggert at me an' chafft me—an' Aw seed summat under her cloak."

As he spoke David hitched himself forward so that he sat on the extreme outer edge of his seat; but he saw nothing that helped him.

"An' Aw follert her — aw th' way to Pye Green."

The twigs behind Saul snapped, but David's expectation of speech was disappointed.

"An' hoo went daan a back street. Aw crep' up behint, an' seed her tak' a parcil fra under a cloak."

That was it!—Saul was too intent on what he was hearing to speak!—and so David plunged to his climax.

"An' as Aw watchet her hoo cut daan a ginnel an' walked straight into a ——" But the sentence was never finished. There was a crash; the half-emptied milk bowl went flying against the house door, a great hand slapped heavily on his mouth and held it as in a vice, and there above the amazed tale-bearer towered Saul, with blazing eyes and white, wrathful face. "Daan wi' it!" he shouted. "Swaller it! If thou spits another word aat Aw'll choke thi!"

David was the stronger man of the two, but the other had him at a disadvantage, and made the very most of it. Still glaring angrily down, he cried indignantly, "Dirty maath! Am Aw a public tip for scandal? Am Aw a slander

middin? Am Aw a hoile for mangy dogs to bring ther maggoty boanes tew? Swaller it! that soart o' rubbitch is to be consumed on the premises;" and then, releasing his squirming victim and stepping back for safety into the doorway, he cried, "Pike! tak' thi savoury duck to them as loikes 'em! Cheese is cheese, an' critikism is critikism, but we dunna want noather on 'em here—when the'r' maggoty."

David blustered and threatened, but suddenly seemed to think better of it, and flung out of the gate, muttering reckless threats as he went; whilst Saul paced up and down between the door and the garden gate, defying the offender to do his worst, and flinging after him sundry texts of Scripture more or less suitable to the occasion.

When the younger man was at last out of hearing, the irate schoolmaster kicked the bits of broken pot into the road, locked the gate, stood staring at the smooth head of Aldershaw top, now bathed in the rose and gold of sunset, and then strolled leisurely indoors.

Here he found Lettice, his ill-shaped, ugly-looking foster-daughter, whose baptismal name had been abbreviated somehow into "Tet," sitting quietly upon a little oak settle between the long-cased clock and the fireplace. She was reading an old brown-covered tract, and if she had heard the commotion outside, gave no sign that she had done so, but went on perusing *The Gambler's Doom.*

She was anything but fair to look upon, for she had a crooked spine, prominent teeth and upper lip, a flat, insignificant nose, and a drooping right eyelid, which gave her a grotesque, satirical expression. Of themselves her eyes were beautiful, dark and gipsy-like, but their presence in such a face only made the whole countenance more repellent than it might have been. She knew all about the scene at the front door, having only left her place behind it as the schoolmaster entered. She was too experienced, however, to show curiosity, and went on with her story as though he were still outside. Saul had a lofty contempt for her opinions, modified curiously by an almost superstitious reverence for what he called her "hinstincts," and so, as talking was one of the necessities of life to him, he dropped down into a big, greasy-armed chair, upholstered in chintz, and remarked, "Aw've gan wun young scopperil belltinker, at ony rate."

Lazily abstracting her good eye from her book, and blinking the other reluctantly at him, she asked, "Whoa?"

"Davit Brooks! he's goan whoam wi' a flea in his yer-hoile."

Tet slowly raised her head, tilting it back sufficiently to enable her to see him easily from under her pendulous eyelid, and then, curling her ruins of a nose and her upper lip scornfully, she remarked, "H'mph! Aw wodna wed him if ther' worna anuther felley i'th kingdom—he's nor even middlin' lewkin'."

Such a remark from such a source would have sent a stranger into roars of laughter, but as Saul was used to it he gave no sign save a passing flicker of fun in his eyes.

There was silence for several moments, and Saul in his abstraction had evidently forgotten her presence; but presently she dropped her book upon her lap, and looking at him from under her brows, asked carelessly, "Less see, haa monny wik aar we bak in aar rent?"

Saul brought his eyes suddenly down from the joists and stared at her stupidly; his jaw dropped, his breath came and went, and presently he gasped out, "Good God, wench, he's aar landlord!"

It was evident that Tet was perfectly aware of this, and sat there furtively watching him from under her leering eyelid. She saw his chin drop upon his chest, and his head and neck sink deep between his shoulders. A groan escaped him, he looked wearily round, and then muttered, "We're dun! we're dun! He'll sell us up, stick an' stump!" and then he added bitterly, "An' Aw've browt it on mysel'."

There was a twinkle under Tet's unmanageable eyelid, and her face looked heavier and uglier than ever.

"He'll send th' bums in a wik. O Tet! Tet! Aw'm sendin' thi back to th' bastile" [workhouse].

The hunchback leaned forward, propped her elbows on her knees, her good eye still fixed upon her foster-father, now groaning louder than

ever. Thus they sat for some little time, and then she moved her head, glanced round at the gathering shadows, stepped across the floor, and went outside to close the shutters. Cottering them safely from within, she procured a slim candle, and then stood looking dreely at the forlorn and miserable pedagogue. Thus she watched him musingly for a time, and presently, as though making for the stairs, came up to his side, and just in passing, and as the most casual of all remarks, she bent down, and in a voice in which gratitude, sympathy, and intense devotion expressed themselves, she said, "The rod of the wicked shall not rest on the lot of the righteous. When a man's ways please the Lord He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him," and then she moved on to her bedroom, leaving the master abashed and rebuked, but with a face all wet with unwonted tears.

CHAPTER IV

ANOTHER!

THE schoolmaster would have been considerably dashed if he had known that the gable-enders were not discussing his wonderful sermon at all that lovely summer night. The fact was they had a much more interesting topic—nothing less than another suitor for the hand of that insatiable and shameless little flirt, Milly Scholes.

The sermon, indeed, had been dismissed in three curt sentences.

"New wine in an owd bottle," grunted Peter Jump, the blacksmith, as he dropped heavily upon the bench.

"Wine? Sma' beer, tha meeans," corrected 'Siah Bumby.

"An' no' barm enuff to blow th' cork aat," added Dick Meg.

And then they turned eagerly to the succulent subject; for a new instrumentalist had appeared in the singing-gallery that night, and that would have been sufficient for a whole evening's debate if the new-comer had been an ordinary person, which he wasn't by any means. He was a great,

red-haired, fiery-looking fellow, with gorgeous variegated waistcoat, immense expanse of shirt-front, a long thick silver watch-chain, and a velvet-collared coat in the lapel of which was a scandalously noticeable rosebud. To wear flowers in the chapel, except at the "Sarmons," was in Slagden to be a publican and a sinner, and public prejudice against the stranger had risen to boiling point.

But who was he? Where did he come from? Why had Dan Stott, the musical director of the chapel and school, given no previous hint of the coming of the dandy? And why, oh why, had he thought it necessary to obtain the services of a second clarionet?

"Clarionet thi granny!" grunted Seth, the milkman, as he squatted down amongst the tree roots and lugged out his pipe. Seth played the bassoon, and was therefore "in the know"; but 'Siah was not to be put down, and so he demanded, "Hev Aw tew een i' mi yed or Aw hev'na?"

"Tha met as weel hev 'em i' thi yer-hoile fur ony good they are tew thi. Clarionet!"

"Well, wot is it, then? Thaa caws it a Jew's harp, Aw reacon!"

Seth deliberately lighted his pipe, in supreme indifference to the fact that eleven persons were anxiously waiting for his reply, and then he took a long and careful survey of the high and distant clouds, fell indolently back against the tree trunk, and remarked lazily, "Onybody as know'd a tin

whistle fro' a barril-organ 'ud know as it wur a hobo."

Two or three repeated the name in wondering exclamation, but the majority rolled their eyes skywards in a vain endeavour to recollect where in their district they had ever heard of such an instrument. The oboe was rare thereabouts, and respected accordingly, and everybody present realised that if the coming of the new player should lead to his permanent inclusion in the Slagden chapel band the village would rise several "notches" in public esteem. There was therefore a perceptible stiffening of indolent backs and a raising of so many heads a trifle higher, and 'Siah was just preparing his belated retort to Seth when somebody cried in a startled whisper, "By gum, chaps, he's here." Instantly the four men under the pear tree fixed relentless eyes upon the Mangle House chimneypot, and the eight against the gable-end stiffened into stony rigidity and stared as for dear life down the old road. The oboist, nervously pulling down his waistcoat as he came, passed right through their midst amid a breathless silence, and turned to the right in the direction of Saul Swindells' house; and the agile Peter Jump skipped on tiptoes to the gable corner and peeped cautiously round. No one spoke, any inclination thereunto being instantly checked by the wild gesticulations of Peter's right arm as he stood with his face glued to the edge of the gable-end. Then the signals stopped, Peter's long nose was bent awry and crushed

against the bricks, and his outer optic blinked with incredible rapidity. The silence grew uncomfortable, and 'Siah, half in rebellion, but still in tones carefully low, was just commencing the remark he had not yet got rid of, when the signals began to work again, the spy danced softly back from his place, rubbing his stomach and doubling his body in uncontrollable contortions, whilst his face struggled with a rush of varied emotions that twisted it into indescribable grimaces; and when at last he could be reduced to coherent speech they learnt the paralysing fact that the oboist had just disappeared down Grey Mare Lane with Milly Scholes. Here was matter enough for conversation surely, and in a few moments tongues were loosened, heads were shaken, and opinions were expressed which would have made the oboist, had he heard them, angry, and brought the blush of shame to the "brazzened" cheeks of the hardened Milly.

An hour and a half afterwards, David had his jealous eyes seared by a similar sight to the one Peter Jump had beheld, and, in fact, it was this which accounted for the very supine way in which he had taken the schoolmaster's assault. Nearly every person in Slagden under fifty had been at one time or other the pupil of Saul Swindells, and most of them retained some amount of fear of him. It seemed natural for him to clinch his arguments with physical force, and David's amazement at the attack made upon him, together with the remains of this old-time fear of his

teacher, had restrained him from retaliation; but just as he had reached the garden gate and was preparing to fling a terrible threat into the lattice-work porch, he caught sight of something down the road that made his heart stand still, and extinguished temporarily both the lust of revenge and every other feeling. Grey Mare Lane, as has been explained in a previous chapter, was on the opposite side of the road to the Mangle House and the schoolmaster's dwelling, about fifty yards above the former and perhaps three hundred and fifty below the latter; and in the gloaming of that quiet Sabbath evening he caught sight of Milly and some stranger crossing the road from the lane towards the Mangle House. He was not near enough to identify the man, but Milly's trim figure he could have recognised anywhere—every line of it was graven on his dull brain. For a time he stood gaping in the lane, and Saul's parting shots fell upon deaf ears, for David was staring after the retreating couple utterly unable to believe his own eyes. That Milly should have given him the cold shoulder for such a tame simpleton as Jesse Bentley was annoying enough, but this strong confirmation of the very worst he had ever heard about the girl he loved staggered him utterly.

Mechanically he began to follow them, edging to the side of the road that his footsteps might not be heard on the grass. Milly was turning her head, and he had to dodge into the corner of a gateway to avoid detection. The next moment

he perceived that they would have disappeared before he could get near enough, and so he stooped and ran along the hedge-side to approach them. He was hurrying along with one great desire in his heart, namely, that he might confront the shameless flirt and expose her. But when her companion pulled up and stood for a moment, David had to duck behind a bramble bush in the roadside and watch. The two appeared most tantalisingly friendly, and a light little laugh from Milly made his blood boil, but he dare not move. They turned, however, and went on, and were now so near her home that David despaired of catching sight of his supplanter. He heard a door opened and closed, and almost immediately a second. Ah! of course, but he had them now! They were going to do their miserable billing and cooing in the back garden! To drop on his knees and creep through the hedge was the work of a moment, and as he could now run without any fear of being seen he was soon alongside the holly fence that divided the field he was in from the "enchanted" garden. But holly is not a good thing to see through, and had it not been that Milly wore that same light blue dress he always remembered to have seen upon her on Sundays ever since he knew her, he might have missed them. There they were, however, going down the narrow garden path towards the bottom of the enclosure, where, he remembered, there was an old seat. David glanced eagerly round for something to stand upon, but

he was in a well-kept meadow, and there was nothing to hand. Up and down the hedge he went and searched for the thinnest place, but when he found it the courters were entirely invisible from that particular point. Half-way down the hedge was a tree, but the danger of being heard was as great now as that of being seen, and he had to proceed very cautiously, for it was one of those still evenings when sounds travel far. He got under the tree and took a survey: a spring and he would have hold of one of the lower branches; no sooner said than done; but as he hung there a yard above the ground and peeped over he could not see either Milly or her new sweetheart, but he could see, right across the garden, in the corner nearest the fold and just a little above the level of the wall, the head of Jesse Bentley. David was securely hidden, however, and so when Jesse, hearing some slight sound, turned his eyes a moment, he saw nothing; and a moment later David, with unholy satisfaction in his heart, beheld his more favoured rival watching with amazed eyes the two people in the garden.

All that David could see was a strip of blue frock and a woman's neat foot, and the only sounds that reached him were the indistinct murmurs of voices; but Jesse must be able to both see and hear. Oh, why had he not found the corner that gave the stupid Jesse such an advantage!

These reflections whetted his curiosity, though that was needless, and he dropped from his branch and began to reconnoitre. Good! the bottom

fence of the garden—that is, the one farthest from the road—was a wall, and alongside of it was an old shed or toolhouse. If he could get there and lie flat on the roof, he might be able to overlook them yet. Jesse, he now observed, was going along the fold wall, evidently sick of the whole thing; well, all the more reason why he should persevere. He went carefully along and examined the wall behind the shed, and selecting the point nearest the side he was on, and farthest away from the courters, he raised himself up, and was soon on the wall close to the building, which stood about eighteen inches above the coping. Softly and cautiously he tried the roof: he would not need to look over the other side, at any rate not at first; he could lie along the roof and hear. But the moment he touched the roof his spirits dropped: it was old and very dry, and crackled frightfully as he put his hand upon it. Ah! grand! Why, just under his nose and against the end of the building were three rain-tubs; if he could get down to the ground again, behind these he could hear, at any rate, and perhaps also see. He paused a moment, listened, looked cautiously round, and then put one leg carefully down to try whether the lid of the nearest tub was steady. Yes, all was right! Another moment—ah! Oh! Huh! There was a rumble, a great crash, and an instant later he was sprawling full length on the ground near the gooseberry bushes, with a big tub and certain very unsanitary liquid contents on the top of him. There was a sharp little scream, a

shout, another crash in the bushes, and the struggling intruder was dragged roughly to his feet and confronted with the gorgeously dressed stranger he had seen that night in the chapel singing-gallery.

"D-av-i-t!"

The exclamation had begun in tones of grave concern, but there were quavers of hardly suppressed laughter in it before it ended.

"Wastril! wot dust meean? An' good Sunday, tew!" roared the stranger. But as David raised his head to make a sullenly defiant reply, Milly, whose dancing, mirthful eyes contradicted her serious tone, cried, "Davit, tha'll hurt thisel' sum day comin' that rooad. Haa oft mun Aw tell thi?"

The oboist checked himself. "Oh, I see! you know him, then?"

Milly could not trust herself to reply directly, neither could she risk showing her eyes to the stranger, and so, hedging round so that he was behind her shoulder, she looked steadily at the ridiculous David, and expostulated, "Tha doesn't expect as th' lads 'ull rob us of a Sunday sureli, an' i'th dayleet tew?"

It was dusk only, but that was a trifle; the stranger was effectually hoodwinked, and hastened to offer such sympathy and help as suggested themselves. Milly for some strange reason was crowding her handkerchief into her mouth, but as the two men were engaged with each other they noticed nothing, and presently followed her into the house.

Half an hour later Jesse Bentley sat in what

was undoubtedly the brightest and best furnished cottage in Slagden, disconsolately consuming his supper. That night the iron had entered his quiet soul, and henceforth the world had nor hope nor sweetness for him.

He had missed the grotesque scene just described, and, even if he had seen it, it would have made little difference, for there had come to him the certainty that the woman he worshipped with all the intensity of his deep nature was a heartless jilt. There was a low murmur of voices from the back kitchen, and a little old woman in white cap and bedgown moved aimlessly about the room, putting down everything she handled with unnecessary noise, and colliding with stools, chairs, and all other movables as though anxious to quarrel with them. Her face was heavy with clouds, and she cast on Jesse every now and again sidelong glances of anxiety.

Jesse was not getting on with his porridge, and as neglect of food was a serious transgression in that house, the old lady watched him from a distance, stepped to the long-cased clock, and glowered through her spectacles at the worn figures on the old brass face; fetched a candle, and lighting it as she came, dumped it down on the table; spitefully glanced for an instant into the still full porridge basin, and turning away and commencing to rearrange a perfectly straight bit of tablecloth, she remarked tartly, "Them as turns up ther noases at good porritch cum ta skilly afoor they'n dun."

Gloomy and brooding, with the spoon poised absently over the basin edge, Jesse stared before him without reply.

"Ony flipperty-flopperty bit of a wench con mak' it better tin thi owd mother."

Apparently he did not hear; he was stirring his food about now as though he had lost something in it.

"Porritch! Wot's porritch? Tansy tay an' Hangelial an' Allicompane's mooar i' thy line."

Now this was the first reference, direct or indirect, that old Mrs. Bentley had ever made to her son's courtship; he was one of those easy, comfortable-natured beings who take a secret pride in being managed by their women-folk, and until recently it had been the opinion of Slagden that Jesse would never marry — "he darn't for t' loife on him."

That he never would was also the settled conviction of his mother and two maiden sisters, who were both older than himself and distinctly "on the shelf." Jesse had submitted so long to this trinity of tyrants that the possibility of resistance had been almost lost sight of by all concerned; and so, when at last he discovered that he was in love, he knew that the difficulty of getting Milly, serious though it might be, was as nothing to that of inducing his women-folk to accept her. He could not possibly have chosen a woman who would have been more objectionable to his relatives than the village flirt and miser's daughter; his action was nothing less than wilful

provocation to resistance. His mother's direct allusion to his recent proceedings, therefore, took him as much by surprise as anything could whilst he was in his present frame of mind, and he could not be sure whether it was a good sign or a bad one. But his heart was sore; for twenty odd hours he had been in heaven, and Milly's amazing snatch kiss had so transformed and glorified everything that now his female friends had ceased to be terrors to him. But this had come; he had gone over the fold wall for the purpose of seeing whether his sweetheart was in the garden, as she often was on Sunday evenings, and there he had seen a sight that had turned the world into a dungeon of dark despair. His mother's allusion, therefore, tempted him; women never would talk reasonably, but she was the least unsatisfactory of the lot of them, and so, groping blindly after sympathy, he said in a hoarse, sullen voice, "Aw wuish Aw know'd a yarb as 'ud pizen me!"

He expected an explosion, but his mother's reply when it did come turned the bolt back into his own breast, for she remarked with icy deliberateness, "Well, Aw'll foind thi wun! Aw'd sewner see thi stiff an' stark i' thi coffin nor teed to a trollop like yond."

Amazed, shocked, utterly scandalised, Jesse gaped at his mother in stupefied silence, and when he saw she was not exaggerating her feelings he dropped back into his chair and sighed heavily.

A painful silence fell upon them; all they

could hear was the ticking of the clock and the murmured conversation in the kitchen. At last, oppressed and miserable, Jesse covered his face with his hands and complained, "Onybody con get wed but me," and all his surprise and perplexity returned as she retorted, "Whoa's stoppin' thi? Nobbut say as thi mother's haase is no' good enough fur thi, an' *Aw'll* foind thi wun."

"Yo'?"

"Ay, me! an' a switcher tew! Wun as tha's ne'er hed pluck to lewk at, an' her throwin' hersel' at thi yed aw th' toime."

"Muther!"

"It's true! th' bonniest wench i'th countryside —an' th' best."

But the momentary interest in Jesse's face was fading already, and he was hiding his face in his hands again.

"Hoo'll ha' seven hunderd paand if hoo hes a penny, an' tew noice haases."

Jesse dolefully shook his head.

"An' hoo's a Christian, an' mak's rare Cumfrey wine."

Even this enticing medley of attractions did not move the melancholy man, but his eyes, she could see, were blinking rapidly.

"Tha's nowt ta dew bud walk i'th haase an' hang thi hat up—Aw *know*."

He had not yet got over the unheard-of fact that his mother of all persons was proposing a wife to him; but just here another and very different idea began to shape itself within him.

Milly was worse than worthless; that never-to-be-forgotten kiss was only another and baser sample of her duplicity and heartlessness. To go away and marry another woman would stagger even her, and anything was welcome that would give her the punishment she so richly deserved, and so he raised his head a little and asked dubiously, "Whoa arr yo' talkin' abaat, muther?"

"Hoo'd jump at thi, fost chonce!"

"Whoa is it?"

Dropping her voice to a portentous whisper, and jerking her thumb kitchenwards, she raised her eyes significantly and said, "Hoo's i'th haase this varry minute."

"Whoa is it?"

"It's Emma Cunliffe—so theer!"

Jesse fell back in his chair and curled his lip disgustedly.

"Why, woman! hoo wodn't *lewk* at me; Aw'm a workin' mon."

Emma was the only daughter of the village butcher, who was also a small stock farmer. Sweet-tempered and pretty, and altogether such a catch that the very boldest of the village swains had despaired of her, the popular opinion was that she would marry some well-to-do outsider. Such persons had proposed to her more than once, and it was concluded that she was looking higher. Jesse was a modest man, and could only attribute this extraordinary delusion of his mother's to her overweening pride in him. His mother, however, was watching him narrowly, and

at last she said, "Jesse, yond wench 'ud dee for thi;" and then, as a shuffling sound of feet came from the kitchen, she added with sudden eagerness, "Hoo's goin'! Goo tak' her whoam an' mak' it up!"

Jesse was strongly tempted; his mother's amazing confidence infected him, and he longed for almost anything that would enable him to retaliate upon the shameless mangle girl, who he knew would receive him next time he went as sweetly as ever, and so he stammered, "Yo're dreeamin', muther!"

"Am Aw? Thee go an' see."

"Bud Emma! it's ridiculous!"

"It's reet! Goo on, an' get it sattled to-neet!"

Jesse, staring hard at her, began to rise from his chair. "Aar yo' sartin, muther?"

"Goo an' try, an' foind it aat. Goo! heigh thi!"

"Aw'st say nowt tew her to-neet onyway."

"Tha doesn't need; tak' her whoam, an' tak' thi oan toime."

He sighed, turned to take his hat from the dresser, wavered, and was turning to his chair again, when the old woman in a fever of excitement cried, "Hoo's goin'! hoo's goin'! Away wi' thi, mon!"

Jesse took up his hat, made a dash for the door, stopped, took a wondering, wavering look round, and then, with a smile of exquisite pain, fell heavily into his chair and cried, "Hay, muther, bud hoo isn't Milly!'

CHAPTER V

THE TURNING OF THE WORM

NOW, however strongly Milly Scholes was disliked in Slagden, it was acknowledged that she had effected one great improvement, grateful to motherly minds—she had made mangling popular. The exercise was the bane and torture of boy and girl life in that, as in other villages; for no sooner had the half or full timers settled down to evening play—the girls to "Jacks" and the boys to "Holey," "Piggy," or "Whip-in"—than some cottage door would open, a strenuous female fill the aperture, who, with head cocked at the proper angle and voice uplifted, awoke the echoes with a shrill "T-o-m-me-e!" or "S'lee-na!" and some poor player would suddenly realise that this world was a waste howling wilderness. There were daring spirits who, when the game was unusually absorbing, would have sudden fits of stony deafness, but it made no difference in the end, for though the remarkable aural affliction continued until the mother had screamed herself hoarse and gone indoors, the quiet that followed was so ominous that all interest went out of the

play, and when "father" was observed a few minutes later coming round the corner studying with bland abstraction Seth Pollit's pigeons, or the cloud on Aldershaw top, but with a strap hidden in his palm, or a peggy-stick handle up his sleeve, it was realised that fate was too strong, and there was nothing for it but a strategic retreat. A few minutes later the aforesaid Tommy or S'leena would be seen with blank despair in their hearts, tear-stains on their cheeks, and a hateful clothes-basket on their shoulders, making off to that detested village treadmill, the Mangle House.

As far as the boys were concerned, however, there was always hope to hold them up—adolescence meant freedom; the slow-coming years brought at last emancipation from the slavery of the clothes-basket, and the toothsome privilege of standing at the gable-end and jeering at their younger brothers or sisters still in bondage. And Milly had changed all this; at least temporarily, and for some of the young folk, for though the young men still declined as peremptorily as ever to carry the clothes to and from the mangle, thus running that terrible gable-end gauntlet, they would condescend with hypocritical grumblings, and out of pure consideration for mother's rheumatiz or sister Sarah's preoccupation with "faldals," to "caw an' give a bit of a turn just fur wunce"; the disappointing part of the arrangement being that after obliging with surprising alacrity for several weeks they were sure to come

to an abrupt stop, and were afterwards found amongst the jeering, woman-despising gable-enders. Milly's customers were divided into two classes—those who turned for themselves and thus escaped with half charges, and those who sent their clothes to be turned for them. Broadly speaking, the latter monopolised the earlier hours of the day, and the former took the evenings; but Milly was far too good a business woman to have any hard-and-fast rule. In the later days of the week, when all self-respecting villagers had got the washing out of the way, Milly had to work very hard; and it was then that she had to use all her blandishments to capture or retain useful members of the awkward sex. But it had been noted for years that even in times of greatest pressure the mangle girl had never employed her father as assistant.

On the Wednesday after the scene of the last chapter Milly had been employed all day on the work of those who left all to her and paid accordingly, and by tea-time was very weary and somewhat dispirited. That she had before her the hardest night's work of the week accounted in part at least for this, but it scarcely explained a dejection which she was trying to keep from her absent-minded parent. It had been observed that she was always at her best when she had captured a new lover, but now, though her conquest of the oboist was already public property, she seemed altogether out of heart, and sat at the table after her father had returned to the

herb shop toying negligently with her food, and staring with her great grey eyes at the brown-ware teapot. She lived too hard a life to know much of the luxury of tears, but the corners of her mouth drooped piteously, and her long lashes were rimmed with sparkles of wet.

"It sarves me reet," she murmured. "Aw shouldn't ha' bin sa forrat."

The eyes were brimming over now, and the mobile lips quivering.

"He'll ne'er lewk at me ageean, niver!" And the tears were falling like rain.

"Aw've niver kissed a mon afoor, an' Aw couldna help it, bless him!"

She put her elbow on the table and her wet cheek into her hand.

"He thinks Aw'm chep! — an' forrat, loike t'others! An' he knows we're scratters!"

She sat thus, the picture of sorrow, for several moments, and presently, raising her head and gazing at the teapot again, she proceeded: "Winnat he oppen his dayleets if we manidge it, an' they aw know us gradely!" But then the momentary hope vanished, and with another pitiful shower she cried through set teeth, "Bud we ne'er shall!"

"Cryin', Milly?"

A start, a hasty struggle, a swift sweeping of the hand over the eyes, and then she turned a pouting, puzzled face round to her father, and answered in tones half querulous, half laughing, 'Ay, an' yo'd skrike if yo'd three gawky chaps

efther yo', an' didna know which on 'em ta tak'."

It was the first time for years that her father had seen her in tears, and, though her manner was gaiety itself, her limp look and the red that lingered round her eyes seemed to confirm his suspicions, and so he eyed her sorrowfully, and said, "Specially when tha knows tha conna tak' noan on 'em, poor wench!"

"Connat Aw! Yo'll see! Wait tin—yo' know when—an' Aw'll tak' 'em aw, an' half a dozen mooar, if they wanten."

The old man looked at her with eyes that blinked and shone, and at length he said slowly, "Ay! if they know'd. If they know'd my Milly ther'd be thirty on 'em atstead o' three, God bless thi!"

"Know? Wot does men know! sawft gawpies! They hav'na sense to goo i'th haase when it rains. Aw'll hev two-a-three mooar on 'em on th' stick afoor Aw'm mitch owder, yo'll see."

But the tone did not ring naturally, and was a little too coarse for her, and the old man watched her with wistful pain. His faded cheek went paler as he looked, and at last he said in low, shaking voice, "Milly, my wench, it's spoilin' thi! We mun give it up; we munna spile thee—even for that."

Her only chance was to keep up the pert manner, and she was just about to make a jaunty reply, when her countenance changed; pride, courage, and desperate defiance flamed up into

her cheeks, and she cried hotly, "Ler it spile! It can ruin me, an' kill me, an' breik me hert, but wee'st dew it! Anuther feight or tew, fayther! Anuther desprite struggle, an' wee'st dew it! An' then we can boath lie daan an' dee!"

At this moment there was the "bash" of a basket on the stone table outside, and as Nat turned hastily round and hobbled into the herb shop, Milly subdued her face, and turned carelessly to speak to a girl with a big "mangling."

The mangle stood against the wall opposite to the door, and there was free space at either end, so that Milly could get near to change her rollers. It was a great lumbering, worm-eaten old thing, very much the worse for wear, and that creaked and groaned under every turn of the handle. The great box-like carriage was filled with heavy slabs of stone to secure the requisite pressure, and strong straps attached to the upper edge of the box, and lapping round the big cross roller above the frame, produced, when the latter was turned, the requisite motion to and fro. The carriage ran on long wooden rollers, and when these were wrapped with layers of clothes, all enclosed in a blanket and placed under the box, the handle was turned, and the mangling proceeded. The *modus operandi* was not quite as simple as it may appear to those of our readers who have never seen one of these ancient, but once indispensable, adjuncts to village life. If the rollers were both filled at the same time, the box travelled level and easy, but they

scarcely ever were, and when the person in charge removed one and introduced another, the one that remained, holding as it did clothes that were partly done, had become thinner than the last comer, and so the carriage was tilted up a little and ran somewhat unevenly, requiring very careful manipulation. The mangle, once started, was not allowed to be empty, and so the turner had often to mangle the last roller of his own goods and the first of somebody else's, an arrangement not always conducive to good feeling. On those odd occasions when there was only one full roller left, an empty one had to be inserted to enable the machine to work, the consequence being that the box ran jerkily and in fitful plunges, that threatened every moment most disconcerting effects. Whilst the turning proceeded the mangle woman emptied and refilled the rollers, and if she had to do the turning herself the work proceeded more slowly, and was perhaps, in spite of double fees, less profitable.

The entrance of the person who interrupted Milly's interview with her father introduced the work of the busiest night of the week, and Milly was soon fully occupied. It was hard work, especially at this time of the year and to a person tired to the very soul; but Milly disposed of the rollers rapidly, in spite of the fact that she was more than usually preoccupied, and glanced nervously round every time a foot was heard in the open doorway.

The lover most favoured at the moment was

generally on hand at night to turn when required, but though David Brooks had looked in at the door several times since Sunday, and the oboist had stood like a man for two solid hours on Monday evening, carrying home with him eventually a monster parcel of "yarbs" when he departed, Jesse Bentley, to whom that reckless and shockingly "forrad" kiss had been given, had never once been near. Oh, why was he staying away? and why was the mangling of those most invariable of Monday washers, the Bentleys, not forthcoming? Her dwelling was a sort of open house, for though grown men girded scornfully at it, in the summer-time, at any rate, the stone table outside the door, the bench between the passage and the window, and the short settle were usually filled with folk, who came quite as much to gossip as to work. In the passage stood an old oak table containing a couple of large earthenware bottles with wooden spigots, and two blue-and-yellow pint mugs. The Scholeses sold herb beer of various kinds, especially in hot weather, greatly to the disgust of mine host of the "Dog and Gun." Under the window stood the mangling-table, and though the former was wide open and the door ajar, Milly looked hot and flurried, whilst a weary cloud rested on her face. There were a series of bumps at the door, followed by wriggling creaks, and a small and not too clean basket, with little Tet Swindells at the stern of it, came sailing into the room.

"Tet! thee! at this toime o' day! an' Wednesday, tew!"

The hunchback dropped the basket on the floor, took a calm survey of the room to ascertain how soon her turn would come, cocked her leery eye at the woman who was turning, and then went and took possession of old Nat's armchair. For any heed she gave, Milly might just as well never have spoken.

"Aw'll dew 'em i'th mornin', an' tha con fotch 'em ony toime efther dinner."

"Them rags is gooin' whoam ta-neet;" and Tet, the picture of cool indifference, began to blow a tune through her prominent teeth like a ploughboy, and looked more comfortable than might have been thought possible to a hunchback in a stiff, high-backed chair. She was usually the most impatient and quarrelsome of customers, ready to engage anybody on the momentous question of "Turn," and so Milly, who was changing rollers at the moment, glanced at her inquiringly, and then replied, as she spread her blanket, "Aw shanna hev a minute tin bedtoime, an' *tha'll* no' turn, tha knows."

"Aw'st please mysel'! Aw'm a foine seet stronger nor thee—an' better lewkin' tew."

The woman who was turning gave a little screaming laugh, and even Milly's drawn and anxious face relaxed. Tet, more at her ease than ever, leaned her head back lazily, and, blinking from under that disreputable eyelid of

hers, drawled mockingly, "Tak' thi toime, Barbara, dunna fluster thisel'; it isna iverybody as mangles for a wholl fowt."

It was an open secret that people with small families sometimes "pooled" their mangling for economical reasons, but as this abridged the Mangle House profits it was considered dishonourable, and as Milly had both a keen eye for garments of changeable ownership and all the imperiousness of the monopolist, flagrant cases came in for condign chastisement. Tet's innuendo, therefore, made Barbara redden with angry resentment, and Milly was just turning to drop in a soothing word when there was the slow crunch of an undecided footstep in the passage, and Milly checked herself to look towards the door and listen. At the same moment the schoolmaster's little housekeeper, who from her vantage point in the arm-chair could see the entrance, suddenly uncrossed her legs, straightened out her short linsey-woolsey skirt, and sat primly up.

"Is it traycle or horeheaund?"

The voice was that of David Brooks, who was leaning with a studied air of indifference against the jamb of the outer door, his whole manner intended to signify that he really didn't know why he asked the question, and didn't in the least care whether he obtained any answer.

Tet and Barbara glanced at each other, and then at Milly, who apparently had not heard, though the would-be customer had been loud

enough. There was a long pause, broken only by the laboured groans of the mangle. Then another footfall, but this time on the step outside. David was evidently retreating, and Barbara coughed to attract Milly's attention.

But that young lady went on with her roller-packing, a smile of easy confidence on her face and a pucker of dawning amusement in the corners of her mouth. The step was heard again in the passage, a slow, undecided shuffle this time, and followed by certain clinkings of pots. Tet hastily smoothed down her coarse hair, and rescued an old brass brooch from the folds of handkerchief that concealed its glories, whilst the woman at the mangle looked interested, and Milly sly.

"Is this traycle or horeheaund, Milly?"

He was standing in the doorway now, and trying to look independent and patronising. Milly did not turn her head; she peeped cautiously through the open window as though interested in something going on outside, and then speaking with apparent reluctance, and as though his very presence were a weariness, she answered, "Ther's boath, help thisel'."

David was disappointed; he looked back into the highway, then discontentedly round the room, changing uneasily as he did so from leg to leg, turned distrustfully and examined the bottles with his eye, and then asked, "Is it hup?"

"Middlin'; but moind tha doesna pull th' spigit aat."

There was that in Milly's voice which somehow made Tet think of the fable of the spider and the fly, but the kindly invitation to drink was somehow not quite what David wanted. He eyed her sourly for a time, glanced down at the innocent wooden tap with suspicion, and then said sighingly, "Well, Aw mun ha' summat! Aw'm as dry as a rack-an'-hook." He studied the spigot warily, gave it a little experimental tap, and cried, "By gow! it waggles!"

The women laughed mockingly, and Tet sat forward on her chair with a self-restraint very different from her recent easiness. Stung by the merriment, David snatched at a pint pot, and made a plunge towards the bigger of the two bottles. Then he drew back. The thing was "fizzin'" already, and he eyed it with deep distrust. The inside of the pot in his hand was next explored, but, as in holding it up he caught sight of Milly's face, he made another dash at the tap. There was a squeak of turning wood, a sputter, a cry of alarm, an explosion, and David, all covered with hissing froth, came staggering into the house. Milly bounded past him, and had her hand on the gurgling bunghole in a trice, and then, crying with a voice that betrayed her vilely for the fallen spigot, she said, whilst the tears ran down her cheek, "That's a gradely mon's trick, fur sure."

Tet, in a manner strangely meek for her, came softly forward and began to wipe the foam from the discomfited David, assuring him

in a way that was maddening that "it met a bin wur."

David was the picture of confusion and self-disgust, and as the giggling in the passage went on he glared in that direction, and then round upon the conciliatory Tet, as though he would very much like to have fallen foul upon her. Then he began to denounce all bottles and "spigots" and "yarb drinks" for everything he could think of, frowning and fuming all the more because of the maddening laughter in the passage and the uneasy consciousness that as he was now in the house there would be no getting away again until he had paid the usual turning tribute. He had sulkily snatched the cloth from Tet, and was wiping himself down, when Milly, her face painfully straight, appeared with a foaming pot of "traycle" drink. As he took it reluctantly from her she produced a large jug containing the same refreshing liquor, and, placing it on a little shelf conveniently and most suggestively handy for the mangler, she said, with most suspicious kindness, "Ther's plenty mooar when tha's finished that." David scowled and writhed inwardly as he drank, for he realised that he was now most securely captured, and there was no possible escape. He was perfectly well aware that this was Milly's busiest night, and could see that she was tired and anxious for assistance, but he had reason to know that Jesse Bentley would not be on hand that evening, and so he had come to

tantalise her by lolling about, buying drink, and taking his ease before her very eyes. Alas! she had been too clever for him once more, and here he was, caught like a rat in a trap, and evidently the secret laughing-stock of three aggravating women. He knew only too well what that great jug meant; he must make some amends for the blunder he had committed, and there was nothing for him but another night's slavery at that detested old machine. He emptied the blue-and-yellow mug with a savage swig, muttering abuse of himself as he did so. Well, if she would entrap him in that mean, underhand way, she must take the consequences. He knew what he knew, and if he did not make her bitterly repent of her trick before the night was out, well, his name was not David, that was all. The presence of Tet, too, reminded him of another injury for which the exasperating mangle girl was responsible, and this was an additional reason why he should show no mercy. A little scuffle near the fireplace made him look round, and he was just in time to catch Milly trying to take a basket of clothes away from the little hunchback, Tet meanwhile struggling silently, but with might and main, to crowd it into the corner between her chair and the fireplace.

Tet was evidently afraid of him having to turn her clothes; he would turn those if he had to wait all night, and pay the Swindellses out afterwards. Barbara had finished, and was fumbling in the pocket under her skirt for the coppers

wherewith to pay; and Milly, having conquered her in her battle, was commencing to fill her roller with the schoolmaster's washing.

"Heaw mitch o' that sloppery stuff's sheeded [spilt]? Aw con pay fur it, at ony rate."

"Hay, Davit, Aw couldna tak' brass of *thee*. Just turn thease two-a-three o' Tet's, an' we'll be straight."

"Oh! the blarneying witch!" He could have struck her for her mockery, and she looked as quiet all the time "as a pot doll," the hussy!

He did not answer a word, but the slow fire of revenge was burning within him as he watched her getting the rollers ready. A minute later he was "on the mill," and turning for dear life, but with surly grunts and peevish, irregular jerks, which made the old mangle groan. Just then two other customers arrived, before whom he must at least preserve the semblance of decency. The new-comers recognised him as a recaptured slave, and as he banged away, spun the handle round, and made the old machine tremble, they looked at each other with knowing winks, and prepared for entertainment, in a rasping way that sent the iron deeper into his soul.

"Thi muther's lat' wi' her weshin' this wik, Davit; is it her rheumatiz?" said one of the last arrivals, with a sly wink at Tet, who somehow seemed to resent it. David made a savage lug at the enslaving handle, and Milly, looking round from her work with her sweetest smile,

said admiringly, "It's no' theirs. He doesna moind whoar he turns fur, Davit doesna."

David writhed, muttered something about "sewner turn for th' Owd Lad," and glared at the other customers to see if they dared to show even the ghost of a grin. Tet was laboriously trying to catch Milly's eye, and seemed unaccountably miserable all at once.

The mangle girl, however, either could not, or would not, see, and presently she went on, "It's no' onybody as 'ull turn a wholl neet, i' this weather," and the hypocritical gratitude in her demure glance drove away the last thought of mercy from his mind. Tet gave a series of deprecatory, almost imploring, coughs, whilst the other women raised their eyebrows delightedly at the prospect, real or pretended, of getting the work done for them. The mangle was travelling very slowly now, David was deep in thought, so deep in fact that he overwound the machine, and the great travelling box suddenly tilted threateningly up, and there were a number of alarmed little screams. The mistake was perceived, however, and rectified, and David, resuming his labours, and glancing shyly out of the window, remarked, as though he had appreciated the recent flattery, "Aw'st no' be able ta stop lung; Aw've summat on ta-neet," and he contrived to throw into his voice just that necessary hint of mystery that would excite curiosity.

"Ay, sum sawft wench, Aw reacon. Who is

it, naa, Davit?" And the speaker nudged Milly under his very eyes.

His eyes flashed, he nipped his lips together, and then, with relentless resolution, he said, "If awmbry catches me wenchin' ageean, Aw'll give 'em a sovrin."

This produced ironical laughter, and the women noticing an undergarment of undoubted newness, and trimmed with somewhat elaborate "edging," amongst Tet's mangling, became ab-absorbed in the mysteries of needlework, and poor David seemed in danger of being forgotten. After they had had their inspection out, however, and Tet had been duly catechised about the matter, the man at the mangle drew attention to himself again by remarking, "Yo' couldna gex wheer Aw'm goin' ta-neet for a toffy dog."

The women, though only faintly interested, began languidly to speculate; and Fat Sarah, with a wicked glance at David's hair, which was of the most flaming shade of the then unpopular red, hazarded, "Tha'rt goin' ta Bob Dubbit's gerrin' powt," and then she dropped heavily upon the bench behind her and began to fan herself with her apron.

As David, with nervous self-consciousness, lifted his free hand to his head and smoothed it, Milly, with a sly glance at the other woman, guessed, "Tha'rt goin' to Griddlecake fowt warmin' cowd porritch up."

"Nay, he's goin' to Wisket Hill to larn t' play th' hobo," grinned Martha Bumby.

David had gone hot and red; he turned a moment in silence with his back to them, then he set his face hard, and, staring at the passage wall, replied, "Well, Aw'm goin' ta Pye Green, if yo' want ta know."

As he spoke the carriage reached the extent of its tether, and so he wheeled round to bring it back, and flashed a quick glance at Milly. She gave no sign of alarm, however; she was smiling a little, and evidently thinking, and, as he studied her disappointedly, she said, with bantering tone and a most provoking glance at his thick red head, "Ther's a fortin' teller cum to th' Green; he tells yur luck an' curls yur hair for sixpence."

Personal vanity was his weakest point; he had expected that his allusion to Pye Green would at least have checked the sharp-tongued tormentor, but she was utterly unconscious, and seemed to be enjoying the baiting he was getting. And so, stung to the quick and maddened by her jauntiness, he sent the mangle carriage flying from one end to the other with a savage jerk, and blurted out, "Ay, an' ther's a pop shop, tew."

The silence that fell on them was neither so long nor so dreadful as David felt it to be himself. The two women-customers looked at each other in vague perplexity, seeing no reason whatever why such an institution should be mentioned, for everybody knew about it. Had they glanced at Tet, however, they would have seen a

little crooked figure shrinking back into the corner of the arm-chair, and a half-closed eye desperately struggling to express as much horrified amazement as its more perfect companion. But the mangler was looking from under frowning brows at Milly, and it is only bare justice to him to say that the sight he saw swept out in an instant the black passion of his revenge, and brought swift and bitter repentance. For one brief moment Milly's mask had fallen; every trace of colour vanished from her face; her great eyes dilated in stony horror; and she stood there pallid, statuesque, and marble cold. A moment more and the two customers must have seen everything, and of course understood, but a merciful Providence intervened at the most dangerous instant, and there came bustling into the Mangle House the most fussy and talkative woman in Slagden, Jesse Bentley's sister, Maria.

CHAPTER VI

MILLY'S CROSS

"HAY dear! Hay dear mi! Whot? It's as whot as six-in-a-bed! Aw'm as weet as a dreawnt kitlin'! Melt? Ther'll be nowt left o' me bud me back cooamb and me clogs, if this goos on. W-H-E-W!" and the rattling creature, round, red, and rosy, dropped upon the bench by the side of Fat Sarah and began to fan herself with a little bright-coloured silk handkerchief which she snatched from her short, creasy neck. She was thirty-seven or eight, and a spinster; a person, in fact, of considerable importance in the village. She had been for some time the managing spirit of all tea, wedding, and funeral parties, the teacher and natural leader of the young women in the Sunday school: a fussy, good-tempered, but somewhat domineering body. She always treated Milly with studious respect, having in earlier days measured swords with her without any striking success. That she, and not her meek sister Rachel, should come with the mangling was a circumstance sufficiently suspicious had Milly been in a condition to think

about it. She had enough to do, however, with herself at that moment, and was just feeling the return of self-command when Maria glanced at her and at once opened fire. "Goodness, wench, wot ails thi? Tha lewks loike as if tha'd seen a boggart!"

Milly, limp, fainting, and sick at heart, was only too glad of the convenient weather as an excuse, and so, dropping into her part, she leaned languidly against the side of the tea-table, and, wiping the cold perspiration from her brow, replied, "Nay, Aw've seen nowt," and then—she could not have helped it if her life had been at stake—she gave her mouth a wry little twist and added, "Nobbut Davit theer."

The little flash of the old manner, pitiful though it was, was really worth all it cost, for it allayed dawning suspicion and turned attention to the perspiring bondsman at the mangle, thus giving her time to recover.

"Hay, Davit, is that thee? Tha'rt loike th' Clap Haw boggart, tha keeps cumin' ageean;" and Maria had another rub at her steaming face and proceeded, "Ne'er moind, lad; there's noa shakkin' thee off, as Dicky Bob said to th' bum-bailee, tha sticks loike a midge in a traycle-pot."

David looked thundery, and so Milly, anxious to get the conversation back to safer topics, found voice to say, "It's summat to see thee here, M'ria; tha hasna bin across th' step fur months."

"Neaw, tha's bin ill off baat me, Aw'll bet;" and the little dumpling conferred a sarcastic

wink on Fat Sarah, and went on addressing her neighbour, "Sumbry mun lewk efther things; aar Jess's gettin' better fish ta fry."

Milly was changing a roller, and so her face could not be seen, and though Maria watched her narrowly as she returned to the table she gathered nothing from that expressionless face.

Tet, always nervous in the presence of her own sex, now broke a long silence, and brought herself back to the minds of those present by snarling, "Thee goo look! yore Jess knows a trick wo'th tew o' that."

"Hello, pratty face! Ay, he'd cum sittin' up wi' thee, Aw reacon, if he'd ony sense."

"Well, it's mooar nor onybody's iver dun wi' thee, Fat-sides!"

"Huish wi' yo'!" cried Milly faintly. "Naa, M'ria, it's thy turn. Davit wants be goin'."

But the perspiring turner, penitent and curious, protested that it didn't matter, he could do his errand any time, and so Maria handed her basket to Milly, and sat down again to resume the conversation.

"Ay, he'll know wot meyl cosses a paand afoor lung, aar Jesse will. Bud it's better nor loike; hoo's a gradely dacent wench."

David stopped the creaking mangle to listen, Tet showed the stillness of keen attention, and Milly was filling her roller with nervous rapidity.

"Whoa is he on wi' naa?" said Sarah, asking the question that was evidently expected of her.

"Oh ay; tellin's knowin': but it's tan a great

weight off aar moinds—he's sa sawft, aar Jesse is. He met ha' made a bonny mess on it bud fur this."

Everybody felt the cold insolence of Maria's unspoken hints, and even David was looking furtively at Milly and wondering why, with her powers of controversy, she endured it. But women are always cruel to other women, and so Sarah's question was repeated, "Whoa is it?"

"Ne'er moind whoar it is! Yo'll know sewn enuff."

And as Milly was a woman after all, and sorely stung, she could not help the poor little retort. Dropping into blandest tones, she said kindly, "Ay, it's queer, isn't it, as th' yungest i'th fam'ly should goo off fost?"

She was looking dreely through the window as she spoke, and all at once her face dropped, a shadow passed quickly by, a smart step was heard in the passage, and just as Maria was commencing her reply the oboist strode into the room. The women looked up in shy surprise, Tet uttered an indescribable little cry, and the big man, who was carrying an old-fashioned book like a volume of music under his arm, and whose presence seemed to fill the apartment, came forward, and with an easy nod at the mistress of the house, took a seat on the opposite side of the fireplace to the schoolmaster's little housekeeper.

The big man looked overpowering even in his week-day attire, for he wore that certain sign of gentility, a shirt front and collar on a week-day, and it was noticed when he began to fill his pipe

that he had a ring on his little finger. He reminded Maria, as she afterwards stated, of a "Noyton Wakes chep Jack." He mentioned the weather, but as he addressed nobody in particular there was no reply. He spoke banteringly to David about the value of the mangle as an aid to physical development, but as the mangler was almost sure he was "codding" him, he replied with an inarticulate grunt.

Then he noticed Tet, and stared in rude surprise at her unusual physiognomical characteristics, until the little hunchback, pulling nervously at the front of her skirt, shrank farther back into her chair, and muttered something about "flusterin' scowbankers," to the instrumentalist's evident amusement.

The atmosphere was getting quite electric, and Milly looked restive and miserable. Then, as the others began to talk suddenly and with unnecessary loudness to each other, the stranger plucked at Milly's apron, and she leaned over from her roller-packing to listen. They talked thus for some time, he tapping urgently upon the back of the book he had brought, and she shaking her head with pensive decision. He was evidently persuading her to something to which she objected; he insisted, and she held out; and all at once she became conscious of an odd stillness, and, looking round, discovered that the mangle was standing, sundry baskets had disappeared, and David, Tet, and the rest were gone.

Two hours later, when the gable-enders had all

gone home and all the sounds of life in Slagden were still, Milly sat on the edge of the little stone table beside the Mangle House door, with the sweet peace of a perfect summer evening resting on her and a soft, cool breeze fanning her cheek. But there was no peace in that fretted, fear-driven heart, for she was back in the occurrences of the evening and feeling once more the stabs and stings she had endured. Her face was turned up the road in the direction taken by the oboist when he left her, but her thoughts were not of him. Her aching limbs, her burning head, and her jangling nerves were forgotten, and she was fighting desperately against an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. Hers was a difficult problem, a fierce, terrible fight, and at the moment when sweet hope ought to have assisted her, she seemed to be staring at dead blank walls of insurmountable difficulty. As she sat and mused, however, she became vaguely conscious that something was moving near her; there came the crackling of twigs and the soft fall of a foot, and then out of the corner of her eye she saw a little crooked figure coming stealthily along the hedge-side. She was not startled, her thoughts were too far away for that; and she noticed these movements some little time before the sense of their singularity came upon her, and when it did she had already recognised the figure of Tet Swindells, who, with a shawl round her shoulders, a clog on one foot and a man's slipper on the other, came hastily forward and stood before her.

"Tet! thee! Wotiver's up?"

But the little creature was evidently agitated, and stood away. With flashing eyes and almost savage expression, she cried in thick, agitated voice, "Didn't he say Aw wur noice, gradely noice, when iverybody cawd me fow?"

"Ay, well, bud——"

"An' didn't he threeap 'em daan as Aw wur gradely when they said Aw wur maddlet?"

"He did, wench, an'——"

"An' didn't he fotch me aat an' tak' me tew a noice beautiful whoam?"

"Oh yi, bud——"

"An' didn't he, when Aw wur badly, noss me, an' sell his blessed owd books ta get that quality doctor fur me, an' sell his watch an' his black stick wi' silver on it as wur a presentiment tew him?"

"He did, wench, an'——"

"An' mun he be sowd up an' goo to th' bastile when tha'rt rowlin' i' brass?"

"Huish! huish! Cum here wi' thi; tha'll waken mi faythers;" and Milly rose hastily, caught the excited creature by the arm, and dragged her to her side upon the stone table. It took some time to pacify her, and just when Milly thought she had succeeded, some impish freak came into her head; she grabbed fiercely at Milly's arm, and hissed into her ear, "He shanna be sowd up! he shanna! If tha doesn't help uz, Aw'll tell wot tha goos to Pye Green fur—*Aw know.*"

Milly went cold as the stone on which she sat.

Her secret was known to a half-demented creature like this! Then she calmed herself, put her arms confidingly round her odd companion, and slowly, by crooked, disjointed little fragments, drew out Tet's mournful story.

"But, Tet," she expostulated, with miserable voice, "we're no' rich; we're as poor as yo'—an' poorer."

Tet pulled herself away, held Milly at arm's length, reading her face as she did so with flashing eyes, and at last she said, in hopeless resignation, "Then wun on us mun wed him, an' Aw winna."

Even then, with the sickening thought of this new danger added to her already unbearable burden, Milly could not help laughing at the grotesque absurdity of the suggestion; but she could see that her companion was in no trifling mood. Their debt was only a little over three pounds, but it might as well have been three thousand. Her head buzzed, her heart throbbed and trembled within her, and a great, unutterable longing to get away and end the hopeless battle came upon her.

"That's it! tha mun wed him. He's tew haases of his own beside aars, an' brass i'th penny bank, an' tha could twist him raand thi finger. Aw'd wed him mysel' bud fur—summat."

Milly did not inquire what the "summat" was. She realised that Tet, by her very peculiarities, was no common difficulty, and so she braced herself, and coaxed and wheedled, and stroked

poor Tet's coarse hair, and finally, with a pledge of secrecy, reluctantly given by the hunchback and vague, halting promises on Milly's part, they separated. Milly saw her companion part of the way home, and then stood in the road until the click of a garden gate told her that her friend was safe. She shuddered as she turned back towards home; the very paltriness of this last difficulty enabled her to measure more accurately the extent of her own helplessness. Her secret, the dreadful, haunting nightmare of seven long years, was already partly guessed by at least two persons, and these two about equally dangerous.

Oh, never was situation so excruciating as hers, and never was helplessness so utterly helpless. She had energy, she had courage, she had trust in herself and trust in God, but to-night, beaten down, overwhelmed, almost beside herself, she pressed her temples with her hands and prayed for the light that would not come. She held up her face to catch the cool breezes, and her wild eyes travelled to the distant stars. "Shine on!" she cried hysterically, "shine on! an' wink an' blink an' dance! *Yo've* no debts ta crush yo', no trubbles ta breik your heart: yo're happy, an' Him as made yo's happy, ay, *far* tew happy ta think o' me." And then she dropped her arms, her eyes wandered sadly over the shadowy earth about her: a sudden shiver shook her frame, the great deep within her was broken up, a shower of relieving tears began to fall, and she faltered—

"When Aw conna carry mi cross ony longer, Aw con dee on it—like HIM."

As she moved with swimming eyes and shining face towards the Mangle House door, the cracked bell of the old Slagden church in the distance struck eleven.

CHAPTER VII

DELICATE NEGOTIATIONS

Now when David skipped on tiptoes out of the Mangle House, whilst Milly was whispering with the oboist, he carried with him a heart that was raging with the tortures of jealousy. He had been softened and reduced to penitence by the effect produced upon Milly when he showed her that he had discovered her miserable secret, but the sight of the interloper and the gallingly familiar terms upon which he seemed to be with her, drove all relenting away, and made the dull fires of revenge glow hot within him. Jesse Bentley, though recently the favoured candidate, was something like his equal, and it would be a fair fight between them; but this intruder, with his flaring dress, and his bouncing, overbearing manner, was just the sort of person to take the eye of village maidens. Ah! by what stupid perversity was it that such girls always preferred an outsider? But he would be revenged; nothing should stop him now; he hated the oboist, he hated Jesse, he hated—oh! how he hated the unscrupulous Milly! and as for those Swindellses,

he had thought of passing the thing over, but now they should pay or smart. But when the first spasms of his angry jealousy were over, they were succeeded by a sense of helplessness, of self-pity, and a longing for confidence and sympathy. At first he had thought he would publish what he knew about Milly upon the housetops, and thus cover her with well-merited shame, but he had not reckoned with his own nature. He was one of those persons who dearly love a secret for its own sake, and, like children reserving their tastiest bit of sweetmeat for occasional future licks, prefer their pleasures long drawn out. He would play with the thing, as a cat with a mouse; he would drop equivocal remarks and mysterious hints, and ease his own smartings by feasting his eyes on the tantalised wonderings of others. Jesse Bentley, for instance, was in the same boat as himself—why should he not share his secret? Besides, nothing would ease his own feelings more than to watch the sufferings of some fellow-unfortunate. Jesse and he had once been bosom friends, though now they were not even on speaking terms. Yes, he would seek out Jesse at once. His resolution was very firm and decided, and he saw his rival one way or other every day; but somehow, although they met during the next week several times, David did not even see his friend.

Once he dodged down an entry in Switcher's Buildings to avoid a meeting, and yet, by processes of reasoning only possible to inconsistent humanity, he fully convinced himself that Jesse

was purposely avoiding him. One night they sat next but two to each other on the gable-end bench, and the departure of those between them left nothing but a gap to separate them; but David got up nervously and hurried away, though only, as he said to himself, because he was sure Jesse was about to do the same thing, and he wouldn't give him the chance. Growing more restless and miserable every day, he determined, with adamantine resolution, that he would dally no longer, but make an opportunity if one would not come. He was suffering, and it would be some little relief to see somebody else in the same condition. Then he convinced himself that for some dark reason Jesse was dodging him, and this brought things to a climax. That very night he saw young Bentley go round the fold corner and make down the road with a pair of clogs under his arm. He was evidently going to "Skenning Tom's" to get them repaired. David pulled his cap over his eyes in firmest resolution, and started after him. Jesse was going very easily, but somehow—it must have been the weather—he *could* not overtake him. Jesse turned round, and evidently saw him; David became suddenly intensely interested in the old milestone by the roadside. Jesse resumed his walk in a sauntering sort of way, as though anxious to give the other an opportunity of overtaking him. David was so disgusted that he turned and looked back towards the village as though more than half disposed to return. No

sooner had David resumed his pursuit than it was Jesse's turn to fall under the sudden fascination of something on the roadside. If there had been a lane or even a stile, David would have taken it and abandoned the whole thing. Jesse sat down on a stone heap and began to examine the clogs he was carrying, ostentatiously oblivious of the proximity of his rival. David, caught in the toils, and unable to do anything but walk straight on, stuck his thumb into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, puckered his lips as for a soundless whistle, and began to search the sky for a lark that was filling the air with liquid music. There were not ten yards between them now, but to Jesse the world contained nothing but clogs, and David had not yet discovered the feathery musician.

The pursuer was approaching, was passing, had passed; in all the heavens there was not such a thing as a lark now.

"Hello, Davit!"

It was a real enough start that David gave, though the elaborate and expansive surprise with which he stopped and half turned round was perhaps not quite so successful.

"Hello, Jesse! That thee! Haa tha feart me!"

The dawn of a shy smile was Jesse's answer, and the clogs became interesting again. They were some seven or eight yards apart, and David stood in the twisted attitude of a man who had been arrested by a strong surprise and had not recovered. Why didn't the stupid Jesse say something to give him an excuse for standing at

ease? Jesse was in a world of clogs. David scoured the sky for that lark once more, glanced up the road and down, and everywhere else, except where he wanted to, and at last he made a plunge, and said—

"It wur Noyton Sarmons o' Sunday."

"Ay." (A seeming eternity of silence.)

"An it 'ull be Billy Haases next."

"Ay."

David was standing on both feet now, and should have been at ease; but a maddening sense of conspicuousness was upon him, and he felt as if he stood alone amid vast and boundless reaches of space, with the eyes of a silent and gaping universe upon him.

Jesse raised his head for the first time, and stole a sidelong glance. David returned the look with interest, but neither spoke.

Another awful, endless silence, and then in sheer desperation David hazarded, "Yond hobo wastril 'll be goin' ta Billy Haases, Aw reacon."

"Ay."

Ay, ay, nothing but "Ay"—David could have choked him.

"He's gerrin' desprit thick wi' Milly, isn't he?"

Another weary, lamentable "Ay."

"Aw conna see wot he sees in her, con thaa?"

David took a couple of steps nearer as he spoke, but the only answer was a muffled groan and a despairing shake of the head.

"Hoo's noather nice-favort nor nice-spokken; th' felley as gets her 'll catch a tartar."

No answer at all this time.

David eyed Jesse with chafing wrath, and wished the clogs he was once more studying were at the bottom of the sea. And then, with a sudden inspiration, he made a dash forward, as though he would fall upon the speechless one, pulled up just in front of him, and, stretching out his arm, he cried, "Sithi, Jesse, if that wench went on her bended knees to me naa, Aw wouldna lewk at her."

He seemed to be about to drop down confidingly at Jesse's feet, but with sudden return of shyness he edged off, and took refuge on the next stone heap instead. There was only a narrow gutter between them.

"Wot's he want comin' takkin' th' pick o'th bunch fur? Let's *tew* him, Jesse!"

Jesse found his tongue at last. With a long melancholy sigh and a mournful stare at the opposite hills, he shook his head and lamented, "Aw conna understond Milly one *little* bit."

"Understond? Neaw, bur Aw con!" And then, the last frail barrier of diffidence vanishing, David strode across the gutter, and, dropping at Jesse's side, he put his hand confidentially on the other's sleeve, and continued, "Sithi, Jesse! if tha know'd wot Aw know, tha'd *pizen* her."

Jesse turned upon his companion a sorrowful, protesting look, but the ice having been broken, David began to pour into reluctant ears the whole miserable story of his discovery about Milly. "Jesse," he cried, as the other rose to resume his

journey, "Aw wodna touch th' dasateful little hypocryte wi' th' end o' my finger! An' as fur yond tootlin' player, Aw'll feight tin Aw dee afoor he'st have her!"

Jesse seemed to be getting uneasy, even resentful; but David, now in full cry, accompanied him to the clog shop, talking savagely as they went. When the errand had been discharged, they strolled back up the road, David still pouring into the other's ears all his grievances, not omitting the ill-treatment he had received at the hands of Saul Swindells, and finishing up with a very significant threat as to how he intended to revenge this latter. They were approaching the gable-end by this time, and the sight of these old rivals walking and talking together caused several pairs of eyes to open in amazement, and almost before they had run the gauntlet and were out of hearing, Peter Jump, with his back to the pear tree and his face drawn into a pious whine, sent Saul Swindells into a roar, and twisted Seth Pollit's face into an agonised grin, as he "lined out" in exaggerated preacher-like intonation—

"Come on, my *pardners in distress.*"

About the same time next evening, little Tet Swindells was seated in the old lattice porch picking off gooseberry stalks, and congratulating herself that so many days had passed without any sign of David Brooks' wrath.

"Is Saul in, Tet?"

Tet started, brushed down the front of her short skirt to hide the poor thin legs she never

forgot, and then, bridling up severely, she answered—

"Neaw, he isna. Stop wheer tha art; Aw'm bi mysel'."

Jesse looked disappointed, but amused.

"Tha'rt no' feart o' me, woman, sure-*li*?"

"Tha'rt no bet-ter nor t' rest. Noa dacent woman's safe wi' noan on yo' naa-a-days."

The thought of any man having amorous feeling towards this deformed and ugly little creature would have amused most people, but Jesse felt a tear in his heart. He knew, however, that this was the subject of all others upon which she liked to talk, and so he said, "Well, yo' womin shouldna be sa desprit pratty; haa con we help it?"

There was not a trace of either vanity or suspicion on Tet's face; to her this was the very simplest matter of course.

"Help it? Yo'll ha' ta help it! Ther' wouldna be sa mitch kussin' an' cuddlin' if they wur aw loike me!"

Jesse felt morally certain of this, though Tet sat there and smoothed her dress again as disdainfully as though she had been a court beauty.

"Why, Tet, tha'll niver get a felley if tha goes on loike that!"

"Get? Will ony felley get me, that's th' p'int? Hay dear! Aw'st ha' sum wark wi' 'em afoor they'll aw be said;" and then she added, with a sigh of sublime resignation, "But sumbry mun rawl wi' 'em, Aw reacon."

Jesse glanced up and down the road, and then, with an inquiring look, he asked, "Mun Aw cum in an' wait tin he cums back?"

Tet was on her feet in an instant. "Cum, if tha dar'! Dust want awth' villige clatterin' abaat us, an' Milly scrattin' mi een aat, tew?"

"Bud Aw've cum of a harrand, let me sit me daan."

"Stop wheer tha art! Yo' men's sa forrat. Let seein' content thee fur wunce;" and as she sat sedately down and arranged her troublesome skirt, it looked as though the unmanageable eye were winking wickedly at the demure modesty of the other side of her face.

"Tet, hast iver yerd Saul grumblin' abaat me?"

"Wot's he getten to dew wi' it? Aw'st manidge baat him, if chaps cums i' cart-looads."

"Aw dunna mean that. Has he ne'er mentioned abaat me owin' him summat?"

"Neaw! Doesta?" and that demonstrative eye began to blink rapidly, whilst a hungry eagerness rose into the face. "Doesta? Then tha'd bet-ter be payin'; we wanten it! Haa mitch is it?"

"Abaat four paand, Aw dar' say."

"Jesse! J-e-s-s-e!" and then she dashed at the gate, caught him by the coat, jerked him into the garden path, and forced him down on the porch seat. "Thaa doesna mean as tha's cum ta pay? Tha con pay *me*;" and she held out her hand with an eagerness that sent pangs of pity into Jesse's soul. Jesse pretended to hesitate, study-

ing admiringly the little hand, which was, oddly enough, of exquisite shape.

"Aw'd sewner pay thee nor him, if tha'll promise summat."

"Wot is it? Aw'll promise owt;" and the eager creature was pinching his arm tightly.

"As tha keeps it tin he says Aw owe it tew him; if he's ne'er mentioned it, he's happen furgetten; it 'ud be just loike him!"

"Tha'rt sartin tha owes it?" and there was a trace of rising suspicion in her anxious voice.

"Oh ay! Beside, Aw'st ne'er be able ta pay wot Aw owe to my owd schoolmestur."

She was watching him with an intent scrutiny that was embarrassing, but when she put out her hand hesitatingly, he counted the money into it with unnecessary deliberateness, that he might study again that one beautiful feature of this odds and ends of a body.

But, even when he had finished, the arm was still stretched out, and her eyes were riveted hungrily on the coins. She moved her hand to feel the weight of the money, glanced misgivingly at Jesse again, and at length, with face radiant, beaming, and almost beautiful, she looked towards the smiling evening sky, and burst out in thrilling musical tones, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit doth rejoice in God, my Saviour; for He *hath* regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden;" and then, breaking suddenly off, and snatching shyly at the amazed Jesse's arm, she began to shower on his coat sleeves

a succession of passionate, grateful kisses, as though she never intended to stop.

Ten minutes later, as Jesse was leaving, she stood at the garden gate and bade him a cheery good-night. When he had gone a few yards down the road, however, she called him back, and upon his return she looked at him seriously for a moment or two, and then said, in almost solemn tones, "God bless thi, lad! Tha's dun mooar nor tha knows ta-neet;" and then, with, if possible, deeper seriousness, "Dunna fret abaat Milly; tha's bin good ta me, an'—an' there's as good fish i'th say as iver wur cotched."

As Jesse went down the road towards home he flung his face skywards and cried, "O Lord! wot *does* Ta meean? A sweet woman's soul in a flay-boggart body! Tha does sum rum things sumtoimes, Tha does fur sewer."

CHAPTER VIII

TET TURNS THE TABLES

WHEN Jesse left Tet, after he had so greatly relieved her mind, she stood watching him go down the road until he turned the gable-end corner, and then, with a face upon which the intense spiritual emotion of their interview had given way to one of almost giddy triumph, she gripped the shaky old gate and shook it delightedly, spun round on her heels and kicked out her spindle legs in a wild impish dance, and finally, with a hasty pretence of spitting on the coins for luck, she tossed them into the air and caught them again. She did things in jerky fits, except when she was playing a part, which was fairly often, and it was quite characteristic of her therefore that she should check herself suddenly and stand still, blinking her eccentric eye at a rose bush which she did not see. Then she made a dart at the gate, scurried down the road at the top of her speed, and presently stood at the Mangle House back door, calling for Milly. The summons had to be handed from one impatient customer to another before it

reached its proper destination, but as soon as the mangling girl appeared she dashed at her, grabbed her by the "brat," and cried in tragic whispers, "Thaa con pleaas thisel' abaat weddin' Davit; Aw've getten th' brass," and then, with a series of short emphatic nods, she turned to leave. Another thought struck her, however, as she went along the house-side, and whisking back, she called her friend again, and added patronisingly, "Thaa con hev him if tha wants, tha knows; Aw'm nor settin' my cap at him. Ay," she added, as the situation defined itself before her mind, "tha'd be aar landlady then! By gow, Milly, Aw'll put in a word fur thi, if tha loikes."

That a word of hers would be more than sufficient to decide so momentous a question Tet obviously did not doubt for a moment, and though Milly laughingly told her to please herself, she went back turning this new idea over in her mind most soberly. Before she reached home, however, her thoughts had reverted to her own affairs, and she gradually slowed down until she came to a standstill in the road. For a while she scrutinised the macadam severely, her good eye blinking rapidly and the lid of the other labouring with comic pertinacity to keep up with it. Suddenly she raised her head, plunged her long arm into an apparently bottomless pocket, drew out a halfpenny, and darting at a group of children playing on the roadside, committed the one reckless extravagance of her life by paying the

coin to a small boy to take a message to David Brooks.

David received the summons at the gable-end, and for the moment treated it with lofty contempt. But he was feeling just then a sudden and most alarming loss of popularity; for the very people who had been so glad to receive his whispered secret about Milly's journeys to Pye Green now treated him with coolness, and the village magnates, the fountain of local courtesy, ignored him altogether. Saul Swindells, the chief talker, was mum enough, and for the best of reasons, but even he showed a negligence which was almost defiance, and so altogether David was feeling very much out in the cold. But Tet's message reminded him of her curious and most unusual conciliatoriness on the night when he had fired his first shot at Milly; generally she was the touchiest of all his acquaintances, but that night she had been palpably afraid of him, and afraid of anything being said or done that might anger him. She was uneasy, it appeared, and had no doubt sent for him to beg a little more grace in the matter of the overdue rent. He would show her! The more the gable-enders cut and flouted him the more would he take it out of her. And so he began to lounge up the road, hardening himself as he went to have none of her "conifogling ways," and in fact nothing but hard cash.

Tet, when he reached the gate, sat sewing in the doorway; for once she even forgot her short

skirts, and leaned against the far corner of the lattice porch with a humble, appeasing smile on her face.

"Well, what dust want?" he demanded in tones of uncompromising gruffness.

Tet went on with her stitching, and at length, glancing up with a deprecatory look, she said, "Well, Aw dunna loike t' tell thi gradely—tha'll no' be vexed, Davit?"

"Aat wi' it! Wot is it?"

Tet took it very leisurely, and had the air of one who feared she might be naming an offensive topic. "Aw dunna loike tell thi, lad, but Aw con see nowt else fur it."

"Well?"

"Tha munna tak' on, lad; we aw hev aar bits o' trubbles, as they say."

"Goo on wi' thi: let's have it!"

"Aw've bin thinkin' abaat it fur a great while naa, bud Aw couldna bring mi mind tew it."

Angry impatience and rising curiosity were struggling within him, together with a dubious sense of being defrauded; this was not the manner of one afraid of being turned out of house and home, and so he cried petulantly, "If tha's owt ta say, aat wi' it!"

"Ay, well, then—tha winna be vexed, Davit?"

David uttered something very expressive under his breath, and turned round to leave her. Nothing disturbed her, however; pensive but bland, she watched him departing, and so, after

a step or two, he did as she was perfectly certain he would, he stopped, and turned round. "Aw'll gi' thi wun mooar chance: art goin' tell me what tha wants or artna?"

He had evidently forgotten the rent he was so determined to have.

She dropped her head in apparent bashfulness, looked at him from under her damaged eyelid misgivingly, and then, with a wheedling leer, she faltered out, "Aw want to gi' thi a month's noatice, Davit. We're flittin'."

If she had announced the certainty of immediate Judgment he could not have been more dumfounded; it was the very last thing under heaven he would have expected. Saul had occupied that narrow, odd-looking house for thirty years, and it was public knowledge that nothing but death would ever move him out of it. David had come to hector a defaulting tenant, and here he was placed all at once on the other side of the counter, so to speak.

"Bud! bud," he gasped, "yo' owe a lot o' rent!"

As though that were the merest trifle, she leaned back lazily, and said, like a person suddenly reminded of a slight oversight—

"Oh ay! Aw dar' say we dew! Haa mitch is it, lad, an' Aw'll pay thi?" and sliding her hand down her skirt for that same endless pocket, she languidly produced four sovereigns and a few smaller coins and began to sort them, repeating as she did so her inquiry as to the exact amount.

The sight of the gold astonished David more than ever; he could have sworn that the Swindellses never had anything like that amount at any one time. But Tet had the manner of one to whom even larger sums were trifles.

And then he was a man of business after all; the schoolmaster could have his choice of half a dozen suitable houses in the village if, as appeared, he really was not inseparably attached to this particular tenement. Besides, he already had two empty houses on his hands, and uncertain and small though the schoolmaster's rent was, it was better than the other alternative—nothing. At any rate, he had better proceed cautiously, and so, chafing at this totally unexpected and most tantalising turning of the tables, he cried, "Flittin'? Wot fur? Aw've ne'er bothert yo' abaat th' rent!"

Tet's queer eyelid was flickering ominously; she held her head on one side and answered mendaciously, "It's no' that, lad."

"Wot, then? Aw'm no' raisin' th' rent!"

"Hay, lad, Aw wodna live i' this haase rent free, it's that damp."

"Damp? It's tan yo' a foine while ta foind that aat."

"It's goan that rooad wi' neglect, tha knows. Hay, mon, it's awful!" and she spoke in a carefully regulated voice, as though David were the last person in the world to be responsible for such a state of things.

David subdued himself with difficulty to a tone

a little nearer friendliness, and began to ask for particulars. Tet indicated faults, necessary repairs and whitewashings, etc., in a tone of languid interest, as though, having decided to leave, it was now a matter of no particular concern to her; and then becoming, as she talked, very confidential, she asked his opinion about a house very much nearer the school and newer, and one which had been empty for so long that the rent had been twice reduced. David, as she knew quite well, was aware that it could now be had for a little less per year than the Swindellses were paying. To get her away from so dangerous a topic he asked permission to inspect the premises, and the air of negligent indifference with which Tet showed him scaly whitewash, crumbling, discoloured plaster, and paintless fixtures was a sight to see. The longer they talked the more concerned and propitiatory the erstwhile stern landlord became, and when, after promising all she desired, and suggesting additional repairs himself, he was only too glad to get away, he took care not to allude to the outstanding debt, and avoided reference to anything that might remind her of it; whilst they owed him something they were the less likely, if contented, to depart.

When he was safely out of sight Tet executed another wild dance in the garden walk, and then committed the unheard-of extravagance of stopping the passing tripeseller and purchasing two whole trotters for Saul's supper.

. . . . . .

"Seth."

"Bazoo—zooo——"

"S-e-t-h!"

"Bazoo—zoo—zoo—zoo."

"Seth Pollit, dust yer me?"

The music stopped, but the long slender lip of the instrument was still in the player's mouth, and he only turned his near eye towards the half-door of the shippon and waited. Having a masterful, talkative, painfully tidy wife, Seth had turned his shippon into library, smoke, and music room; and on wet or cold nights it was also the Parliament House of the gable-enders. You could have large premises for small rents in Slagden, and so the milkman's cow-house provided ample accommodation for his "beasts," and still left the whole of one side of the building for other purposes. A channel ran down the middle of the shippon, and on the other side of this Seth had arranged old chairs, milk-stools, bins, and shelves for farriery purposes, his bassoon being kept in the driest and least worm-eaten of the bins. Seth was the village philosopher, and had the characteristics and disabilities common to that small but illustrious class. He was taciturn, his reputation depending mostly upon what he did *not* say—an indubitable philosophic trait. The utter expressionlessness of his wooden face contributed that air of mystery without which no great sage maintains his reputation, and to complete the comparison he was henpecked; and

though Saul Swindells had probably never heard of Xantippe and Socrates, he did not fail upon occasion to remind the gable-enders of Ahab and Jezebel, and John Wesley and Mrs. Vazeille, as instances of the common fate of all great minds in the matter of matrimony. I do not know that there is anything particularly philosophical in a bassoon, but all great sages have their foibles, and if the other immortal ones got as much comfort out of theirs as Seth appeared to do out of his, they were very well worth the having. Into this cherished instrument Seth could blow opinions which would have raised domestic whirlwinds if suggested in the bosom of his family. He constantly suspected himself of frivolous and vainglorious tendencies, though nobody else perceived them, and when he became aware of the accumulation of heady gases, he made haste to let himself down by blowing the dangerous vapours into his bassoon, whilst occasional fits of depression were disposed of in the same way. But the other excellences of the instrument were as nothing in comparison with its unique value as a mental winnowing-machine; and when its owner got "mixed" and confused about any matter, the only way to separate the wheat from the chaff was to have a good long interview with the bassoon. On the night upon which David had his talk with Tet, Seth, having several knotty points to settle, had sought clearness and comfort where he never failed to find it, and

was moodily blowing his reflections into his beloved idol. He had been responsible for the placing of Jesse Bentley's name upon the plan, he was also the leader of the young women's Society class in Slagden, and signs had recently appeared which gave him serious uneasiness. The voice that had interrupted his harmonious musings was that of his wife, who, accompanied by Maria Bentley, stood looking askance at him over the half-door of the shippon.

"Stop that squawkin' din, wilta?"

The musician's eye rolled round in signification that he heard, but his lips were already groping for the mouthpiece of the instrument again.

"Seth, tha'll gi' them beeasts rinderpest wi' that racket; their tails is whackerin' this varry minit." This from Maria; but Seth's eyes were stealing down the stem of the bassoon again.

"M'ria Bentley, he'll stop them beeasts milkin' sum day, as sewer as Aw'm a livin' woman!"

"Bazoo—zaa—zoo—zee!"

"Drat the plaguy thing! wilt stop it?"

"Seth, huish, mon, an' hearken: ther's summat up."

"Hay, wench, he'd blow that skriking thing if Aw wur deead i' my bed! T' cause o' God! Wot's he care abaat T' cause?"

Seth rolled both eyes round to indicate that he was prepared to hear.

"Dust know as aw th' young women's goin' t' leeav th' class, Seth?"

"Wot's he care? He'd sit bletherin' theer if aw th' villige wur backslidin', loike that felley i'th Bible as fiddlet when Lunnon wur brunnin'," added Mrs. Pollit disgustedly. Seth's eyes were wistfully caressing the bassoon again.

"They sayn as they'll no' cum to th' class no mooar tin hoo's turnt aat."

"Hoo owt bin turnt aat lung sin', the impident powsement, an' hoo wod ha' bin if hoo'd a hed a leeder as wur wo'th owt."

"An aw th' wenches i'th singin' pew says as the'r' no' goin' in if yond Wiskit Hill gawpy comes ony mooar."

"Hoo's a shameless hussy, an' he's a hafflin' scowbanker, that's wot they are."

"Pop shop! an' then cumin' an' sittin' wi' dacent folk! Aw'll show her!"

"Bazoo——zi—zee—zoo."

The two women had both of them much experience in detecting such slight signs as the wooden-faced milkman gave of his state of mind, but that crazy instrument baffled them utterly.

"Hoo's breikin' aar Jesse's hert."

"Hoo's bringin' scandal upo' th church."

There was a pause; both women eyed him indignantly, and at last, poking the mouthpiece at his lips and missing, he remarked slowly, "Aw know wur nor that abaat hur."

"Eh? Wot? Wot dust say?"

The two were now leaning eagerly over the half-door, but the player did not answer.

"Goo on, bad-bobbin; wot dust know?"

"Bazoo——"

"Hoo's hed five felleys sin' Kessmus, dust know that?"

"Wur nor that!"

"Hay, goddniss heavens, hear thi, M'ria! Tell uz, mon! tell uz!"

Seth was evidently interested in some flaw in the keys of his instrument.

"Hoo goos poppin' things ta Pye Green, dust know that?"

"Wur nor that!"

The two gossips lifted scandalised hands and gazed amazedly at each other.

"Aat wi' it, mon! Wot is it?"

"Goo on, Seth! heigh thi! Wot dust know?"

"Aw know"—but as they leaned intently over the door with greedy ears he stopped, and felt the bent mouthpiece with his lips again, and then, glancing slyly at them, he continued, "Aw know—Aw know as hoo isna woman enough ta backbite her neighbours———. Bazoozoo——zow——zeeezaaa!"

The utterly unexpected nature of this retort, together with the stolid imperturbability of the man who uttered it, struck the gossips dumb for the moment, and when at last, drawing long sighing breaths, they raised themselves up from the door edge, each avoided the eye of the other, and stood there abashed and speechless. The

milkman's wife was the first to find her tongue. "M'ria Bentley, hev Aw towd thee monny a toime as ther's woss sooarts a husban's nor them as welts ther woives?"

"Tha has, wench!"

"An' hast seen it fur thisel' ta-neet?"

"Aw hev, wench!"

"An' will tha let thisel' be tan in bi a dooliss wastril as Aw've bin?"

"Aw'll niver think of a felley no mooar, as lung as my name's M'ria."

And as they turned away with noses in the air, and chagrin and defeat on their faces, there came out of the shippon a long, jeering, unbelieving Bazooo——zoo——zee——twee——!

CHAPTER IX

AN INNOCENT SPIDER AND A RECKLESS FLY

Now the disclosures made by David Brooks to his rival produced, as David might have expected, the very opposite effect to the one intended, and Jesse carried away from the interview a heart full of wondering pity for Milly and her old father. How they could be poor, or at any rate as poor as the facts detailed seemed to indicate, was as great a mystery to him as to the rest of the villagers, and the more he reflected upon it the more perplexing the thing appeared. The uppermost feeling, however, was one of concern, and the more he thought the more determined he became to assist them; and so the next day he framed quite a number of little schemes for their relief, well knowing how careful he would need to be lest they should be led to suspect him. He did not lose sight, however, of the fact, that in helping them, if he could do it cleverly enough, he would be furthering his own purposes and strengthening his position with Milly. The thought of the aggressive oboist nearly stopped him once or

twice, and certainly roused the devil of jealousy within him. If he thought much on those lines he would do nothing, and so he resolved to leave that question for later discussion. His first task was to render the relief to Tet and her foster-father, described in a previous chapter, and on his way from the schoolmaster's he called at the Mangle House to arrange for his first preaching lesson. Alas! two minutes after, with face red with sullen resignation, he was doggedly turning the mangle, glancing about here and there and everywhere to avoid the nods and winks with which the female customers were conveying to each other their keen appreciation of the neat way in which the resourceful Milly had captured him. Jesse was disgusted; keen disappointment and a humiliating sense that he had been fooled and made an object of ridicule made him burn inwardly with savage resentment. If Milly had a spark of true delicacy in her, she would not expose him to be made a laughing-stock of like this. The use he made of his eyes also added fuel to the fire within; for in searching about for something upon which to fix his gaze, so as to seem not to see the others, his eyes alighted upon something propped carefully in the corner next the fireplace. It was a new umbrella of painful smartness, dark green in colour, with glaring brass tips at the ends of the whalebone ribs, and an obtrusively striking buck-horn handle. Such an article could only belong to the dandified oboist, and the manifest care with which the

wretched thing was being preserved told its own exasperating tale. Jesse was furious, and the fires of jealousy grew hotter and hotter within him. To watch Milly as she moved about her work and to study the expressive changes on her mobile face had always been ample compensation for any amount of either chaff or hard turning; but now, the sight of her sent cruel stabs of rage into his soul, whilst the whisperings and suggestive coughings of the women galled him past endurance. A few moody, undecided turns of the handle, one last desperate fling at it, a savage kick at an empty clothes-basket, and Jesse, with tossed-up head and flashing eyes, stalked out of the Mangle House, followed by a chorus of exclamations and a volley of relishful, hilarious laughs. He spent that night tossing about in bed and grinding his teeth, and next day, after much mental wrestling, he returned his "plan" to the superintendent of the circuit, accompanied by a note in which he declared that nothing would induce him to continue the work to which he was supposed to have been called. The rest of that week was spent by the miserable fellow in making and abandoning all sorts of foolish schemes for his future. Again and again he formed the savage purpose of waylaying and fighting the oboist, then he thought of emigrating, or at least of leaving the village wherein he was born, for ever, and thus getting rid of all the torments and worries that come of women and their ways; and finally he resolved to marry the

first decent girl that came to hand. The last idea not only continued longest with him, but returned again and again with a persistency which encouraged the thought that it was inspired. It was with him all Saturday, and he wandered in the smiling fields resolving and re-resolving that that was the thing he would do. Up to this time, however, he had never discussed with himself who the favoured lady should be—that was a detail which could be settled any time; but on Sunday morning in the chapel, he sat in his pew, and, heedless alike of sermon and preacher, painted harrowing pictures to himself of the amazement and consternation of the Scholeses when he marched past the Mangle House some fine morning, on his way to Slagden church, with a blushing bride on his arm.

At home, however, not all the solicitous attentions of his women-folk could make him even civil, and he accepted unusual Sunday dainties with ungracious grunts, and answered all remarks addressed to him in curtest monosyllables. It seemed to him that they were wanting to pry into his secret thoughts, and one moment he was wishing that his sisters would go out and give him a chance of speaking to his mother, and the next he was wondering how long it would be before he could decently go off to Sunday school. His mother watched him furtively, and he saw every glance and counted it an additional grievance; everybody was against him, and life was a torment and a snare. Then his fairly healthy con-

science smote him; what a base ingrate and a mean-spirited, spoilt baby he was! But it was not his fault, after all, it was *hers*: and he glowered at the slumberous fire, and vowed and vowed again to serve her out.

"It's toime t' be goin', Jesse; and if tha *will* ha' sugared crumpits to thi tay tha mun cum back an' tooast 'em thisel'."

The delicacy named was Jesse's special weakness, Sunday was not Sunday without them; and this was his mother's characteristic way of conveying to him that his fancies had not been forgotten. But he only gave his head a sulky toss and replied, "Eight 'em yoursel'."

"Me? For shame o' thi impident face! Dust want me t' have crump o'th stomach aw neet? Tha's noa mooar feelin' nor a gate-pooast."

Jesse made a surly reply and stalked off; but his mother knew that she had touched a tender point, and that silent penitence would bring him back to her when school was over. Front doors were mostly used on the Sabbath, but Jesse, looking somewhat humbled and propitiatory, came in at the back when he returned.

"Oh, tha'rt theer! Well, pike forrat an' see as tha tooasts yond crumpits gradely; they wur aw covert wi' ess [ashes] last toime."

Jesse was in no mood for conversation, and, removing his hat as he went, he strode forward into the front room. As he opened the inner door he pulled up with amazement, and a look of foolish embarrassment appeared on his face; for

there, in one of the stiffest and most uncomfortably stylish of their best chairs, sat Emma Cunliffe. Remembering in a flash his recent conversation with his mother, it did not need a second thought to show him that this was a palpable "plant," at least as far as the old lady was concerned. But his heart was sore and lonely, and the bright little woman in the chair was ravishingly pretty, and so, glad of anything to divert his sombre thoughts, he exclaimed, "Hello, Emma! is that yo'?"

The visitor, who was one of those susceptible creatures who alternate between shyness and equally excessive over-confidence, fidgeted and shrank back in her chair, answering confusedly, "Ay."

She had brown hair and eyes, a clean rose-and-white complexion, dainty little dimples, rich lips, and white regular teeth, whilst her dress was of that popular colour which Jesse, with the rest of "mere men," called "puce." She wore a beautiful cameo brooch, not quite so large as was then the fashion, and a pair of elastic-sided block-fronted boots, which set off becomingly her tiny little feet. Jesse, who had vowed scores of times during the last four days never to look on a woman again, felt his sore heart warm, and as there seemed a sort of providential inevitableness in their meeting, and he was in a drifting, sympathy-seeking frame of mind, and here found it waiting for him in its most attractive shape, he was not the man to despise his good fortune.

They did not shake hands—for that was a sign of stiffest formalism in Slagden—but Jesse stood with his back to the sleepy fire, and glanced her over from the masses of her wavy hair to the tips of her dainty boots, and felt that here if anywhere was an excuse for the recklessness he had been contemplating. He had not sought this temptation, Providence had put it directly in his way, and if he did yield to it, well, that was its own lookout and not his. For some time neither of them spoke, but presently Jesse made a discovery, and plunged with nervous haste into conversation.

"Why, Emma, dunna sit up o' that stiff chur; sit here an' be comfortable, woman;" and he pulled forward his mother's favourite rocker. Emma shrank back and timidly declared that she was "aw reet." Jesse became fussy and insistent, but in a fidgety, overdone way. Emma would apparently have been glad to shrink through the chair-back, and refused to move. He brought the chair forward and pressed her. She shook her pretty head and blushed violently. He insisted, and took her tremulously by the arm; Emma put her hands up and begged to be let alone. But somehow—one never knows how such odd things come about—she rose to her feet as she spoke. Jesse drew her one way, she pulled or seemed to pull desperately the other, and just at that moment there was the click of a latch, and Maria's shrill voice cried, "Naa, then, yo' tew! Be dacent! Noan o' your Tummas-

an'-Mary wark here! Aw'm shawmt fur thee, Emma."

Emma began a confused and indignant protest, and was so absorbed in it that she did not observe, of course, that Jesse was gently pulling her into the rocker, and when she did find out where she was, well, perhaps it was the safest place after all, when there was a bold young fellow about. Maria had closed the inner door again, and there was a sudden and dreadful silence. Then Jesse, looking shyly round, noticed the crumpets waiting to be toasted, and a long fork lying at the side of the plate, and so, after immemorial Slagden custom, he removed his best coat, carefully examined the fork, and commenced operations. The fire required considerable poking to make it "fit," and Emma watched him with that superior, smiling look with which women usually contemplate masculine domestic performances. Having properly "fettlet" the fire, and got the crumpet on the fork-end in front of it, Jesse had a fit of musing, and Emma watching him, and beginning to feel more at ease, moved herself a little; the chair gave a creak, Jesse started, and jerked his head round, the crumpet was shaken, and fell into the ashes on the hearthstone, and Emma started forward with a little cry to rescue it. Jesse ducked on the same business at precisely the same moment, two hands gripped the frail and cindery dainty, two burning cheeks brushed each other; there was a laugh, a protest, and—well—well! in another minute they

were crowding each other before that fire, and doing their best to ensure further mischief to that unfortunate little cake.

Then Maria bustled in, and packed Jesse off into the garden for "sallit," and when he had procured and washed the vegetable, and brought it into the parlour, the rest were all seated at table, and the only vacant place was that next to Emma.

"Naa, then, forrat! let th' wench a-be, wilta?" and the crafty Maria shook her Sunday curls at the blushing visitor, and added, "Dunna ler him thrutch thi, wench; theeas felleys is impident! The'r' nowt else!"

As a matter of fact poor Jesse had done nothing more dreadful than move his chair the least bit possible to get to the table at all, but, of course, after that he could not put it farther away, and as Emma blushed furiously and looked almost painfully self-conscious, old Mrs. Bentley chimed in encouragingly, "Ne'er heed aar M'ria, wench; it's a case o' sour grapes wi' hur, isn't it?"

Jesse, genuinely distressed at the embarrassingly personal turn the conversation had taken, made haste to relieve the situation by introducing the interesting topic of the approaching anniversary, now only a week away. One or two novelties were promised for the great event, and these provided topics which kept them on safe ground, though the provoking Maria would persist in nodding and shaking her curls whenever Jesse agreed with Emma or Emma with him. Tea

over, the hymns for the coming celebration had to be tried, and as Emma possessed a table piano, the only instrument of its kind in the village, she was, of course, a musical authority, and it really was remarkable how often her choice with regard to particular tunes coincided with that of Jesse. Then it was suddenly discovered that it was chapel-time, and there was great scurry and haste, and many exclamations about the wonderful way in which the time had passed.

As a rule Jesse went to chapel by himself, but, of course, when they had a visitor, it was the least he could do to show his manners by attending upon and waiting for the ladies. As he paced hat in hand about the room, waiting impatiently, as men have had to do from the commencement of things apparently, he overheard an altercation upstairs; Maria's voice being raised in urgent persuasion, and Emma replying in timid, wavering deprecation. With characteristic Slagden shyness, Jesse led the way down the ginnel and into the old sanctuary; he had become self-conscious again in the presence of so many fellow-worshippers, and was a little impatient to get to his seat. The women pulled up at the door for another whispered debate, Maria looking urgent, and Emma embarrassed. A signal from his masterful sister set him going again, and, fully determined not to stop, he passed into the building, and stalked without pausing to his seat at the end of the pew. And as he turned round to seat himself he discovered

that Emma was being almost forced into the pew after him by his sister. Now when a young lady went to sit in the pew with a young man's family, it was a sort of public notice in Slagden that all preliminary negotiations had been satisfactorily accomplished, and that a marriage might be reckoned upon at no very distant date. Poor Jesse, blushing to the ears and distressed beyond measure for the shrinking girl at his side, fumblingly put away his hat, and resolved to do his utmost to soften the position for her. The pew was supposed to hold five, but there was a pillar in the corner near the door, and so, as this was the day of expansive crinolines, the accommodation was somewhat circumscribed, and though Emma shrank away into the narrowest possible space, they were certainly very close together. But for the whispering behind them his considerate manner would have been a great relief to the nervous little beauty at his side, and as the aggressive fussiness of Maria made her feel that Jesse was her only friend, she almost unconsciously leaned towards him. There was a hymn-book short, and they "looked on" together. As they went to prayer, he pushed the only hassock in the pew towards her, and during the next hymn shyly slipped into her hand those infallible Slagden chapel composers—peppermints. There was one Bible too few also, and when Maria ostentatiously handed her one, what could she do but timidly hold out one side of it that Jesse might follow the reading too? This brought their heads perilously

close together, sending a thrill through him and a blush to her already burning cheek. Jesse's feelings were of a distressingly mixed character; she was certainly a sweet, dainty, confiding little thing; any other fellow in the village would have been bursting with pride to have her so near to him, and he made no doubt whatever that several old flames of hers were watching him enviously. Why shouldn't he be happy? Why ashamed of a sweet little creature like this? He had not sought her, Providence had deliberately thrust her in his way. Why should he not accept the inevitable, and be happy? It would be flying in the face of fortune to resist, and wouldn't Milly Scholes be mad? The lesson was finished, Emma withdrew the Bible with a shaky hand, Jesse nerved himself to sit up and for the first time look his fellow-worshippers in the face. But, as he did so, he saw in all the gathering nothing but the great sad eyes and sadder face of Milly Scholes, looking steadily, wonderingly at him! and darkness complete and awful fell once more upon his soul.

CHAPTER X

THE "SARMONS"

THE great "Sarmons" Sunday dawned in Slagden still and quiet, and the nightcapped heads that appeared at various bedroom windows soon after daybreak lingered longer than was absolutely necessary over the inspection of the weather; for the trilling larks, the high, feathery clouds, and the already warm soft air proclaimed, as certainly as meteorological signs could say anything, that there was not the slightest need for apprehension. For many years now it had always been fine on this greatest day of the year, and it would have been difficult to convince the average Slagdenite that the invariable sunshine was not a direct sign of special Providential favour. About six o'clock the banging of cottage doors and the thumping of pokers against firebacks announced awakening life, and in a short time the landlord of the "Dog and Gun," which only had a six-days' licence, was seen, after a preliminary survey of the weather, setting up a long tresselled table in the open space before his house, whilst Seth Pollit, the milkman, was doing a similar thing

in his big barn, and everybody who had stabling accommodation was transferring cows, horses, and even donkeys to the fields or to other temporary accommodation, to make room for the animals and vehicles of the expected visitors. Presently there was a darting of half-dressed girls with hair in curl-papers, new-looking chenille or fancy beaded nets, and bobbing crinolines from back door to back door, whilst the folds and yards became redolent of hair-oil, pomatum, and frying bacon. Small groups of boys, miserable in stiff new clothes and stiffer collars, forgathered in fold corners, enviously eyeing each other's finery, and outbidding each other in extravagant and, for the most part, purely imaginary statements about the cost of the wonderful garments they had assumed that morning. Here and there and everywhere there came through open doors sounds of domestic altercations between flurried mothers and impatient or disappointed children; the colour of new ties, the tightness of collars, and the cut of new coats providing painful topics for wrangling. Presently the landlord of the "Dog and Gun" was seen stalking across the road and down the fold, carrying that great and yet mysterious bag containing the world-famous double bass, which only saw daylight on this and similar local celebrations. Then came Seth Pollit and his bassoon, followed by less distinguished persons carrying viols, fiddles, a clarionet, and sundry other instruments; whilst the gable-end Parliament began to assemble and discuss the

probable amount of the collection. After an interval Happy Sam and his inseparable colleague, Joe Peech, came to the outer end of the ginnel and began to unroll from its many and various wrappings the gorgeous though now slightly faded Sunday-school banner. This was the signal for a clamorous conflict, developing in more than one case to something very near to a free fight, between the bigger lads, for the proud honour of being cord-holders on the great occasion, a dispute which was only settled after much "haggling" by the interference of the already over-worried superintendents. Meanwhile young men were exploring their own and other people's gardens for buttonholes, and young women hovered about house doors afflicted with torturing consciousness of the newness of their dresses, nervously "letting I dare not wait upon I would," and protesting indignantly if a proud mother or an unceremonious brother "picked" them mischievously into the open air and under the scrutiny of the curious and sarcastic lookers-on. There was a procession round the village before morning "address," and children of all sizes and ages began to gather as starting-time drew near, some in the chapel yard and some in the fold and ginnel. The sudden appearance of two top hats, representing opposite extremes of fashion, and each betraying in the excessive shininess of its appearance the recent application of cold tea and velvet pad, was the signal for falling in, and big children

came lugging their protesting and tear-stained brothers and sisters by the arm, teachers began to bustle about and shout confusing and contradictory orders, young women came sedately down the ginnel trying to look as though new bonnets were the last things they should ever think about, and young fellows tugging, when observed, at treacherous neckties, haunted most evidently by the fear of their getting awry or coming loose, nervously chaffed each other about the respective sizes of their buttonholes or the precise curl of the brim of their billycocks. All at once the silence of death fell upon the scene, and, as if by magic, that struggling medley of young humanity became a long sinuous procession, and began to file down the ginnel, only to discover, as they emerged, that the school banner had already reached the end of the fold, and that between it and the young women's class there had fallen into rank, from who could tell where, fifty or sixty high hats of all sizes and ages. There was probably not a shape in hats or a cut in coats, from the early years of the century to the very latest fashion, that was not represented in that procession. Wide brims and brims that were mere rims, bell-shaped and "long-sleeved," chimneypots and bell-toppers, all were there; and an assortment of black coats, from Nat Scholes' sage-green cut-away to the newest and glossiest superfine frock, that would have completely equipped the nineteenth-century section of a sartorial museum. Silently, sedately,

with most obvious self-consciousness, they filed out, as though a wondering world were looking on. Poor souls! As a matter of fact, except a group of renegades, who no longer possessed such signs of respectability as "walking" clothes, and who shyly propped themselves against the table outside the "Dog and Gun," and a thin line of miscellaneous spectators down the side of the old road, there was nobody at all to behold all this pride and glory. I beg pardon. In almost every cottage door stood a perspiring and already exhausted mother, still *en deshabille*, and as little Tommy in his new velveteen suit and monster posy, or Jane in her gay frock or gayer hat, moved proudly past, there was a sudden glistening of motherly eyes, a sudden uplifting of weary faces, and the work and worry of many days seemed all too little for the sweet reward of that proud moment.

The procession over, there was the address to "scholars, teachers, and friends," as the little poster on the pear-tree stump informed the world. This was given by an old Slagden boy, whose unfailing contribution of two guineas to the collection was rhetorical climax, forcible enough surely for anybody; at any rate it was entirely satisfactory to the Sunday-school treasurer.

But that was not all: the man who gave the address was now an Alderman of a distant Lancashire borough, who, it was hinted in gable-end discussions, might become a Jah Pee "ony minit."

And what if it was the same address every year, spiced by the same venerable witticisms? Was not the man himself the best of all practical sermons? Had not the youth of Slagden the opportunity of gazing for one solid hour upon the Slagden boy who was now an Alderman and prospective Justice of the Peace, reminding them, as it so forcibly did, of what they might some day become? That was discourse forcible enough for anybody, even if the good man never spoke a word. Besides, it was worth while going all the way to Slagden once a year to see the careless, "off-hand" way in which Saul Swindells saluted the great man by his Christian name, and familiarly alluded afterwards to this high civic dignitary as "Little Tommy o' Peter's." But the procession and the address were after all mere preliminaries, the real interest of the day centred in the afternoon and evening preaching services. Not that the preacher mattered much, or his sermon either, they did well if they got off without a distinct snub; the great things were, of course, the music and the "pieces." The chapel was as full as it could hold by two o'clock, and long before half-past, such vestries as opened into the chapel, the chapel yard, and the burial-ground behind were all full of eager worshippers, some of whom had no share in the services until it came to the collection. Every window and door was wide open, and the heat was already stifling. The chapel was a barn externally, with odd-looking rounded ends, but inside you saw the value of

these last, for there was a corpulent gallery at the front end, and a comparatively large singing "loft" behind the pulpit. On occasions such as this the tall box which usually held the preacher was almost buried by the "stage," and upon this there were packed between sixty and seventy girls, all wearing white frocks and posies, many of the former having been loaned for the great celebration. When the girls stood up, the preacher seemed to be lost in a sort of well, and, except from the top of the gallery, it was easier to hear than to see him. The particular anniversary I am describing had been looked forward to with very mixed feelings, and was ever after remembered as the high-water mark of all Slagden "Sarmons" days.

An important and very questionable innovation was to be introduced. For some time the anniversaries in the Aldershaw valley had been characterised by certain disquieting novelties, and particularly that most questionable practice of the singing of solos. Slagden, representative of ancient, and of course superior ways, had so far held out. But Slagden players assisted at other anniversaries, and had, of course, by this means become infected with the popular craze, overflowing, in fact, with praise of the success of the new departure. At first they were not only not listened to, but were treated to scornful contempt, and informed if that was what they went abroad for they had better stop at home. After many gable-end wranglings, however, and much private

searching of hearts, the authorities had at last yielded to popular clamour so far as to allow —as an experiment only, and for one year— the introduction of the ungodly performance. Anxious to propitiate the conservatives, Billy Whiffle and the others who had charge of the arrangements had engaged the young lady from Aldershaw whom they heard sing at the Pye Green "Sarmons," and she was to give a sacred solo at each of the services. The preacher was a minister from a neighbouring circuit, and being of the same stature as Zaccheus, he was almost lost in the circle of white-frocked, curly-headed girls about him. The first hymn, which was sung to old "Lyngham," gave good earnest of what was to follow, and the perspiring instrumentalists put in an elaborate improvised accompaniment, which, of course, made the rival players from Billy Houses and Noyton green with envy. After the prayer there was a prolonged and painfully deliberate tuning of instruments, and presently "How beautiful upon the mountains" was rendered as only Slagden could give it. Whilst the lesson was being read there was a fuss and a rustle in the singing-gallery, and all eyes were turned thitherward to behold the advent of the famous soloist, who was much too great a genius to pay attention to such a commonplace detail as punctuality. She sat during the next hymn, had a glass of water handed to her, and displayed what had never been seen in Slagden chapel during the hundred

years of its existence—a fan! Faces fell, puckers of stern displeasure appeared on venerable faces, and one and another turned to look with painful glances of significance at each other. Did she think that dear old chapel, opened by the great Samuel Bradburn, was a concert hall or a theatre? Then came the "pieces," delivered in that peculiar intonation which was the exclusive monopoly of Saul Swindells' pupils; but though mothers and fathers and grandparents telegraphed congratulatory nods at each other as the performers resumed their seats, the unregenerate looked a little bored and impatient; they were eager for the next item, the grand solo. A doggerel recitation, which the preacher announced had been composed for the occasion by a local poet, was the concluding item of the "pieces," and whilst strangers frowned in perplexed endeavours to think who the author might be, every true Slagdenite looked knowing and mysterious, and Saul Swindells ostentatiously closed his eyes and composed his strong features into an expression of becoming modesty.

The effusion turned out to be a particularly pointed and candid appeal for the collection, and when the triumphant reciter resumed her seat, the preacher announced that "Miss Lavinia Barlow, of Aldershaw," would now sing a solo.

There was a rustle all over the chapel; the men sat eagerly forward and propped their chins on the book-shelves before them, whilst the women

sat as far back as they could, and commenced to fan themselves rapidly with their pocket-handkerchiefs. After much twanging of fiddle-strings and various excited whispers in the singing-gallery, a sharp tap from the conductor's wand was heard, and away went the orchestra to immortalise itself. But the congregation was watching the singer: she glanced round to see if all the windows were really open, groped sideways for her copy of the music, laid it absently on her knee, took another look round, rose slowly to her feet, and immediately dropped back with suddenly whitened face. A sharp little cry from the trebles sitting near her, a murmur of pitiful alarm, and a cry for more air and water; and the singer leaned softly over towards one of her female companions, and dropped her head on the other's shoulder in a half-faint. There was a long breathless silence, a chorus of whispered counsels amongst the players, a gentle self-pitying shake of the head from the soloist, and Dan Stott, the conductor, with red scared face, was leaning over the gallery front and exhorting the minister in a stage whisper to go on with his sermon, when the oboist, who sat on the second row back, rose to his full height, and leaning over Billy Whiffle's shoulder, stared hard under the opposite gallery and shouted, "Thee cum an' tak' it, Milly!"

The little preacher, who had risen to announce his text, looked round at the daring interrupter; everybody sitting in front who could do so turned round and stared hard at the Scholeses' pew, where

Milly was holding down her head and blushing furiously at this unexpected challenge. To the utter scandalising of all who knew anything about Slagden affairs, Milly rose and began to struggle her way out of the pew and down the overcrowded aisle; whilst men and women whisked round and stared at each other in dumfounded indignation. Milly Scholes! why, nobody in that chapel had ever heard her sing a note! As she struggled her way towards the vestry, through which alone she could reach the gallery above, the sentiments of the worshippers found vent in angry exclamations; three or four, amongst whom was Maria Bentley, rose from their seats in noisy demonstration, and prepared to leave the chapel, as all the protest they could make against so utterly scandalous a proceeding. When the white-faced, trembling girl reached the seat near the soloist, the landlord of the "Dog and Gun" flung his double bass away from him in noisy disgust, and clambered, with as much row as he could make, down the steps. Meanwhile angry whispering altercations were going on between the irrepressible oboist and the conductor, the congregation holding its breath and watching with strained interest.

"Aw'll no' stond it! Aw'll no' stond it!" shouted the fiery landlord, who, having failed to get out through the vestry, was now struggling amongst the crowded worshippers for the front door.

But at that moment Seth Pollit gave the

trembling Milly a nudge with the end of his instrument, the soloist also was seen to signal faintly to her, two or three instruments reluctantly struck up the accompaniment, and the next instant the first ringing notes of Handel's sublime "I know that my Redeemer liveth" were ringing through the chapel.

The congregation sat like stones, open-mouthed and wonder-struck. She was singing to untutored ears but to people who were instinctively musical, and in a moment or two everybody was listening spellbound, and mine host of the "Dog and Gun" had stopped a couple of yards from the door and was gaping up at the singer in sheer stupefied amazement.

Milly looked shabbier than ever: the same old blue frock, the same hot winter hat, and the same threadbare jacket, with which they were all only too familiar. But her voice was a revelation—full, rich, ringing! There was not much evidence of musical culture, and many signs of extreme trepidation, but every bar, almost every note, seemed to grip her audience more firmly. As she proceeded, men and women not daring to turn their heads rolled their eyes round to see how their neighbours were taking it, and when, flushed and tremulous, the thin, worn-looking figure sank back into its seat, a great sigh passed over that hot, excited crowd. The oboist stood up and glared triumphantly around, Seth Pollit touched Milly on the shoulder and bestowed upon her a portentous wink of encyclopædic significance,

whilst the landlord sprang forward upon a bench in the aisle, and with shining face and glistening eyes held up two half-crowns to the minister, shouting, "Here, mon! mak' th' collection; ne'er moind thi sarmon."

CHAPTER XI

SETH'S PREMONITIONS

SLAGDEN walked on stilts—stiff, high stilts of pride and vainglorious self-satisfaction. Amongst musical people in a musical district, lowly, despised Slagden had suddenly thrown up a musical phenomenon, and done it in a manner and at a time to fill the whole Aldershaw valley with noisy wonder. The sudden emergency, the disappointment it might have produced, and the dramatic introduction of a local substitute for the distinguished stranger vocalist, had just that element of romantic unexpectedness most likely to appeal to the imaginations of such people, and Slagden buzzed from end to end with self-important boastings. No one in the village, save perhaps old Nat Scholes or Saul, could have defined the word genius; but to most of them it meant extraordinary talent uncorrupted by technical culture, and this was what they had now discovered in Milly. They would rather the heroine of this amazing *coup* had been any other girl, but to themselves the unpopularity of the mangle girl was an added element of interest and marvel.

The sermon, the "pieces," and even the collection, which—it had leaked out—was three pounds higher than the previous best on record for the afternoon service, failed to interest them; Milly and her wonderful solo absorbed all interest and conversation.

There was only an attenuated, private-members'-day sort of attendance at the gable-end, for all the authorities were "on hospitable thoughts intent," except, of course, the Scholeses. Every Methodist who was worth the name had open house that day, and at every table the solo, and that alone, was discussed. The minister and the lady vocalist from Aldershaw had gone with David Brooks to tea, his house being the "quality" home of the village.

"It's a reg'ler corker, it's nowt else," exclaimed David, as he conducted them home to Hullet Fold. He was helping the soloist over a stile as he spoke, and she shook her corkscrew curls and replied—

"Yes, she did not do badly, did she?—considering. She hasn't been in training long, I should judge."

"Lung? Hoo hasna bin a day as we know on."

"I thought so! Her execution — but never mind; she pleased the people. A little goes a long way with village folk, and *we* mustn't be the first to criticise, must we?"

The implied reflection on villagers piqued David, but the "we" appealed to his vanity, and

so he smiled indulgently, and answered, "Hoo went through it tickle—but, like a bull at a gate-poast, didn't hoo?"

"Ah, Mr. Brooks, the old adage, you know, 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.' Between you and me, the technique was shocking."

David did not know in the least what the high-flown word might mean, but the flattering assumption that he would know both the word and the thing captured him, and as he had, or thought he had, abundant reason for hating Milly, he had taken sides against her before they reached home. As they were entering the fold, however, Dan Stott, the conductor, who was a little lame, overtook them.

"Aw say, miss, yo'll no' be singin' ta-neet, Aw reacon?" and he rubbed his red face, and obviously expected that she would say no.

"Oh yes, Mr. Stott. I feel better now; it was only the heat, you know."

"It 'ull be hotter ta-neet, Aw'm feart."

"Will it? Well, I must make the best of it, but——"

"Yond wench 'ud happen tak' it fur yo' if——"

"Oh no, no! thank you. I shouldn't like you to be disappointed altogether."

"Well, if yo' dunna feel gradely yo'll let me know i' time;" and then, dropping into a tone of hypocritical sympathy, he added, "Aw wodna awse [offer] at it, if Aw wur yo'—an' yo'n noa kashion."

"Don't fluster yorsel' (in her temper she was slipping into the dialect). I'll take my work, never fear;" and then, as she turned away, she added to David, "The sawney! I'll take it now to spite him."

There were several guests when they got inside, and the minister was just announcing that Milly's performance was the most remarkable effort, all things considered, that he had heard for some time. David tossed his head, and was about to make a disparaging remark, when he was interrupted by the soloist, who, under new and polite influences, recovered her command of English, and went over to the enemy in a manner that perfectly amazed him.

"Well, yes, it was really very good—for an haymatcheur."

Poor David, deserted even by the person in whose interests he thought he was acting, was glad to take refuge behind the ham, and it was not until tea was over, and the men were smoking, that he found sympathetic listeners in his sister Tizzy and the lady who had so recently deserted him. The latter had entirely mollified him by assuring Tizzy, in a whisper loud enough for him to hear, that she particularly admired auburn hair, and as she glanced at David as she spoke, and thus supplied him with a new and beautiful name for the hair about which he was always nervous, he became as gallant as ever, and having drawn her into the garden, gave her all particulars about the Scholeses, their

nipping ways, their uppish stand-offishness, and the mysterious trafficking with the Pye Green pawnshop. She listened with raised eyebrows and serious shocked looks and shakes of the head, and then remarked upon Milly's shabby appearance, particularising especially her boots, which she had espied, though supposed to be in a faint, when the mangle girl stepped over the bench to take her place. The contradiction between the apparent poverty of the people they were discussing and their reputation for secret wealth provided matter for much speculation, and Tizzy suggested that as they were known to be friendly with Nancy o'th moor-edge, who, though a rival herbalist, was suspected of doing no little business in the way of illicit distillery, the explanation of the mystery might be found in secret drinking. But the soloist shook her head very decidedly. When a girl had such a reputation for flirting as Milly had, and at the same time was so suspiciously short of money, it pointed to one thing, and one thing only; and when David looked the question he was afraid to ask, she turned her head away and remarked to Tizzy that there were some things which no lady could speak about. Both David and his sister knew perfectly well that there was not the slightest ground for the evil insinuation, but all the same he spent some part of that evening in company to which he was not accustomed, and it was freely whispered in Slagden next day—though only amongst the

less scrupulous—that Milly had an indelible smirch upon her good name.

The evening service was not more than an average success; for though the preacher was admitted to have excelled himself, and the collections for the day "topped" by eighteen shillings the best previous effort, the lady soloist made no particular impression; but whether this was because she really was out of sorts, or that her especial anxiety to excel defeated its own purpose, the general verdict was that she could not be reckoned in the same category with the wonderful Milly; and Dan Stott went about declaring that their own girl would soon be assisting at more "Sarmons" than her father had ever attended in his most popular days. Milly herself did not appear at the evening service; in fact, nobody saw her again that day, except perhaps the all-privileged oboist. She had vanished when the last hymn was being sung, and remained for the rest of the day shut up at home with her father.

The visitors had to be regaled with light refreshments and started off on their homeward journeys before the villagers were at liberty to discuss the events of the day, and so the shadows were beginning to gather ere the gable-end council could assemble. Presently, however, one after another, in shirt sleeves and with new churchwardens obtained to grace the great occasion, the village Solons began to gather round the pear tree, and it was characteristic of

them that the very number and interest of the topics they had to discuss kept them silent, so that the bench was full and every root cavity about the old tree occupied before anybody ventured a remark worth recording.

Peter Jump, though bursting to commence, glanced with stern surprise at Billy Whiffle when that worthy ventured to anticipate the proper opening of the debate; but when Saul Swindells at last strolled up, and unceremoniously squeezed himself in between the blacksmith and Seth Pollit, commencing, as he did so, his invariable prelude to all formal discussions, a tirade against tobacco and smokers, Peter felt that the supreme moment had arrived, and so, springing to his feet and standing before the schoolmaster, he cried, "Chokin' be blowed! Wot dust think o'th Slagdin Nightingale?"

"Slagdin Jinny Linn, tha meeans," corrected Billy Whiffle.

"Sithi!" and Dan Stott sprang from the tree stump, and thrusting Peter aside that he might have full fling at Saul, shouted out, "When that wench brast off Aw wur fair flummaxed; but when hoo belled aat them theer top noates tha could ha' knockt me daan wi' th' thin end o' nothin'!"

Grunts of endorsement greeted the announcement, but Dan was still staring at the schoolmaster; there was evidently something coming. He had propped his head against the gable, and

thrust his hands deep into his pockets in preparation for a weighty deliverance. He clearly knew that he was going to utter a "staggerer," and was not inclined to spoil it by hurry.

"Aw've bin expectin' this lung enuff."

This impudent pretence to unique foresight, characteristic though it was of the man, was greeted by a chorus of indignantly ironical shouts.

"Oh ay! tha larnt her that piece, didn't tha?" asked Dan, in scornful sarcasm.

"Ger aat, Dan! he wrate it for her, mon! That theer Andill's a foo' to him," sneered Billy Whiffle.

Saul leaned indolently back, closed his eyes, and smiled indulgently, the picture of condescending, disdainful patience.

"It 'ull cum aat sum day as he larnt Andill hissel'," scoffed Dan.

"Ay, an' Jinny Linn an' aw," jibed another.

"They'll be wantin' him i' Lundon to teich t' R'yal Family," added Billy.

"A prophet is without honour in his own country," simpered Saul, with pious, forbearing smile.

"Does tha meean to say as tha know'd as hoo could sing like yond?" and Peter fixed his sternest frown on the aggravatingly complacent schoolmaster. But Saul was not to be caught by categorical Yeas and Nays; his face put on a far-away look, as though memory were bringing slowly back bygone scenes of sweet delight.

With a stiff, elocutionary sort of wave of the hand, he beat out—

"'The dew was falling fast, and the stars began to blink,

Hay, haa hoo us't pipe it aat!"

"Blink! they did that! they seed thee! Aw'm capt they didna turn into comets an' cut loike redshanks."

But Saul, inflated with delicious musical reminiscence, waved his hand again—

"'A snow-white mountain lamb and a maiden at its side,
A mai-den at its s-i-d-e!'"

The company received this exhibition of insufferable vanity with angry impatience: was the whole night to be taken up by this ridiculous rhodomontade? But at this moment Seth Pollit, who, as usual, had not spoken, took his pipe out of his mouth and remarked, with immovable, cast-iron countenance, "Th' heigher a munkey climbs th' mooar he shows his tail."

The roar of loud, relishing guffaws which followed this highly enjoyable sally seemed to do what no amount of round abuse could accomplish: Saul was on his mettle in a moment.

"Did Aw tell thee seven ye'r sin' last Wis-Sunday as Aw'd fund a rippin' vice i'th schoo' or Aw didna?"

The wooden-faced milkman had apparently not heard.

"Hev Aw towd thee toime an' toime ageean

as Slagdin 'ud brast aat a good un sum day wi' a grand musical projeny?"

"Towd him! He'd want a yed as big as a four-storey factory ta think of aw th' rubbitch tha talks," interposed Dan.

But as things seemed to be drifting, and time was going fast, a knot of gossips plunged into discussion round the stump of the pear tree, and in a few minutes Milly and her amazing success were being discussed in three distinct groups. For the time her oddities were forgotten; she had glorified Slagden in the presence of more strangers than were ever to be seen in the village at any other time, and the experience of feeling themselves famous, and of realising that a short-sighted and self-absorbed world had at last had convincing demonstration of the superiority of Slagden, loosened all tongues, fired all imaginations, and procured for Milly most uncommon popularity. In their most daring flights of anticipation, however, the gable-enders did not get beyond confident predictions of the sensation Milly would produce at local anniversaries and tea-parties; to them that was glory enough for any ordinary person. But Saul was not the kind of person to be snubbed quietly, and so, waiting his opportunity, he dashed in at the first pause. "Tay-parties! A vice like that cumin' daan ta ham-sandwidges an' tew-fiddle concerts! Ha' sum sense, will yo'?"

"Tha'd hev her i' music haws and theaytres, Aw reacon," cried Peter, in his most scornful tones.

Bump went the schoolmaster's head against the gable wall, down dived his hands into his pockets. "Nay, Aw know nowt! Aw've teiched yo' aw as yo' know, an' a deal mooar as yo'n forgetten. But Aw know nowt! Sitch is gratitude!"

"Tha knows haa ta spell bull-scutter [braggadocia] at ony rate, owd buckstick," was the retort.

Ignoring as utterly beneath him such unseemly personalities, Saul pointed his nose to the stars, and remarked, with elaborate pretence of indifference, "Afoor monny moor Sarmon days, yond wench 'ull be singin' i'th new Chrystill Palace, if Aw know owt."

The older men looked as if they thought this not at all improbable, but the younger ones had unbelieving faces.

"They tell me as they get as mitch as a sovrin a day fur singin' i' Lundon," remarked Joe Peech.

"John Dichfilt, Jack o' Sam's lad, 's gerrin' tew paand ten a wik fur playin' th' bass fiddle," added another.

"Cht! cht! Tit—tit—tit!"

This was from Saul, marvelling with wondering pity at such utter lack of accurate information. It was a palpable challenge, but as nobody took it up he raised his voice and remarked, in a manner intended to conclude the matter once for all, "If Milly Scholes gets a penny i' Lundon, hoo'll get twenty paand a wik!"

The debaters were in a sceptical frame of mind

as far as Saul's statements were concerned, and whilst two or three made jibing replies, the rest turned away and began to discuss the probable effect of Milly's coming popularity upon her habits of dress. The circumstances of the Mangle House people being thus introduced, they were soon back upon old ground, and the interest began to flag. It being now about dark, first one and then another lounged yawningly off home, and at length there was nobody left but the two old adversaries, Seth and Saul. Saul, with the fear of Tet's sharp tongue before his mind, would probably have departed too, but the fact that Seth had charged his pipe again was significant, and so he waited. The air began to grow damp; there were a few stars in the heavens, though they were small and distant as yet; bats began to bob clumsily in and out between the gable-end and the pear tree, and the occasional hoot of an owl in High Knowle plantation could be heard. Seth smoked moodily on, and Saul, measuring the importance of what was coming by the time it took to get to it, waited in what was for him most wonderful patience. The air grew cooler, the light in the "Dog and Gun" kitchen was extinguished, an eerie stillness fell upon them, and Seth's pipe had gone out; but he did not speak. Saul could hear the very ticking of the watch in his companion's fob, and the hooting of the owl sounded strangely near.

"Aw've a ter'ble lowniss on me ta-neet."

At last! and here was a splendid opening for the schoolmaster's favourite doctrine, that tobacco

was the sure breeder of nervous disorders and low spirits. But it was difficult to get Seth going, and so dreadfully easy to stop him when he had started, that Saul had to nip his elbows into his sides to keep himelf quiet.

Seth pulled broodily at his cold pipe, sighed again, and then, shaking his head solemnly, he remarked, "Ther's summat cumin', lad! Aw've bin feelin aw th' day one o' them—what does th' preicher caw em?—insentiments, tha knows."

"Per sentiments, tha meeans."

Seth shook his head in doleful assent, and then lapsed into lugubrious silence. It was no use; Saul was boiling over with it, and it was impossible to struggle longer. "Three aance o' thick twist a wik 'ud mak th' fowt pump melancholy."

Another dismal shake of the head was the only response, and Saul realised that there was only one safe method with such a man in such a mood, and so he lapsed into silence.

"Me insoide's as heavy as a cowd berm dumplin'."

Saul waited patiently.

"When Aw caanted th' folk at aar table ther' wur just thirteen."

Saul's lip began to curl, and he had to put a severe restraint upon himself.

"When Aw wur fotchin' th' beeasts whoam, tew pynots [magpies] flew across th' loan."

("Oh, would he never come to the real point?")

"Aw know'd haa it 'ud be when aar Martha bruk th' weather-glass wi' her rawlin' wark."

Another pause, but Saul knew perfectly well this was not the end.

"Aw felt that leetsome this mornin', Aw met ha' known summat desprit wur cumin'. Hay dear! Hay dear mi!"

There was a pathetic quaver in Seth's voice which was very unusual—a sign that caused Saul's own spirits to sink, and all desire to talk went from him. It appeared as though the milkman would never resume, but presently, in a voice steady at first, but gradually breaking until it became almost a wail, he stammered, "Aw could ston' it if ivvery caa we hed run dry, Aw could ston' it if aar Martha talked hersel' black i'th face; bud, Saul, owd lad, Saul! if owt cums ta aar blessed S'ciety, it 'ud breik mi hert!"

There was a long brooding silence, Saul dying with fierce anxiety for details, and Seth apparently too overcome to proceed.

The schoolmaster choked down great lumps of sympathy, glanced again and again at Seth's pipe, and then—oh, tell it not to his fellow-anti-tobacconists—he put out his right arm, leaned over and groped into Seth's capacious side-pocket, pulled out and struck a match, and then patiently held it to his companion's pipe bowl, until clouds of smoke enveloped his head, and he had to relinquish his task in a fit of coughing.

But this supreme sacrifice of principle to friendship had its reward, for the comforted milkman presently commenced a tale of hints and rumours

and signs that sent the schoolmaster home to toss about in bed the whole night through, for the wooden-faced milkman was not the only man in the village to whom the Church of God was more than life itself.

CHAPTER XII

THE RIDING OF THE STANG

SETH'S dismal forebodings notwithstanding, things went on in Slagden much as usual after the ever-memorable "Sarmons." Milly's success was boasted of in all the valley mills where the Slagdenites found employment, and every opinion gathered from outsiders was canvassed to weariness in the gable-end Parliament. In their present mood the villagers would have forgiven the Mangle House people all the past, and have made as much of them as they ever permitted themselves to make of any local person; but the Scholeses kept up the same distant indifference, and either were, or pretended to be, unconscious of the sensation which Milly's impromptu début had made. This, of course, could only be the perversity of pride, and when about the middle of the week it came out that Milly had declined an invitation to join the choir, the old feeling of resentment and suspicion began to creep back.

Jesse Bentley, who had not been altogether pleased by the way in which his meddlesome sister had manipulated both him and Emma Cun-

liffe, and who was on the other hand somewhat flattered by the evident fondness of the pretty little creature for him, was in a very mixed state of mind, and had acted accordingly. In the week between the Sunday when Emma was almost forced upon him and the great "Sarmons" day he had avoided the butcher's charming daughter, and made two attempts to obtain an interview with Milly; but the only result had been that he had done penance on both occasions at the mangle, and made another outrageous speculation in pomatum. Milly was much the same, as far as he could observe, in her manner towards him, but as she seldom went abroad, and was always busiest when he was at liberty in the evenings, things remained between them as they were. Jesse was trying to convince himself that she had only herself to blame for his defection, and that she and Providence were forcing him into the arms of the tempting Emma. The solo episode was as great an amazement to him as to the rest of the villagers, but his first emotion of wondering pride was chastened almost immediately by the remembrance that the hated oboist had played so conspicuous a part in the affair, and knew so much more about her than he did. Both these emotions, however, were soon swallowed up in a great rush of remorse and sympathy. To him, as he listened to her, she was a pleading, reproachful sermon; her shabby dress amid that assemblage of village fashion, her white face, her great hungry, weary eyes, moved his very soul, and there, with his watchful

mother on one side, and his equally vigilant elder sister on the other, he dropped his elbows upon his knees and his head in his hands and groaned aloud. Nothing should prevent him having it out with Milly that night; and so, making a convenience of politeness, he gave up his seat for the evening service to a guest, and joined the company in the chapel yard. But Milly did not appear, and when he was sure that she was not inside, he handed his collection-money to a friend, and went away to spy in the Mangle House garden. But in this also he was disappointed, and his only grain of comfort was that, though the oboist called after the service, he stayed but a very few minutes, and went away alone. He watched the house and garden until dark, watched until he saw Milly letting down her bedroom window blind, and then went sadly home, to listen absent-mindedly to motherly and sisterly scoldings about his absence. Maria meanwhile had guessed something of his state of mind, and taking the rather disappointed Emma in hand, pretended to be keeping her out of Jesse's way.

"Bless thi, wench, uz women hes ta tak' cur of aarsel's. Ther's nowt loike howdin' off a bit; if a woman nobbut lewks at 'em, they thinken hoo's efter 'em."

"Bud, Maria, Aw'm nor efter noabry," protested the blushing Emma.

"Of course tha artna, nor me noather; bud they aw thinken we aar: thee shew 'em, wench, as Aw dew;" and in spite of the fact that there were

guests at Emma's house, she dragged the poor girl into the fold cottage, where, as she served supper, she whispered mysterious little communications to her visitors, which moved them to look scrutinisingly at Emma, and then back at herself with congratulatory smiles.

Some days after the "Sarmons," the knowing ones of the village perceived, or imagined they perceived, a change in Milly Scholes; her skin, the only drawback to an otherwise perfect face, was growing clearer, she did not look quite so tired and anxious, and those who encountered her in wars of words reported her to be "in rare fettle wi' her tongue." It was nothing very remarkable, however, and nobody would have thought much about it but for the fact that in the middle of the following week it was announced that she was going to sing at the opening of the new Co-operative Hall at Aldershaw on the following Saturday. The information, first traced to the oboist, was confirmed on Friday, when the *Aldershaw Chronicle* was delivered in the village, for there sure enough was the name of Miss Amelia Scholes immediately under those of his worship the Mayor and the Hon Mrs. Penteland, wife of the sitting Member. The last train from Aldershaw only came as far as Pye Green Junction, some three miles from Slagden, but half a dozen young folk from the village attended the ceremony, and next morning, Sunday though it was, the chapel yard buzzed with eloquent descriptions of Milly's suc-

cess of the previous night, to which was added that the singer had appeared in a brand new dress of some pearl-coloured material, and a "posy as big as her yed." This was news enough surely for one day, but when Saul and Seth strolled after afternoon school to the gable-end they received the story with a significant embellishment, to the effect that both dress and bouquet were the gift of the man with the oboe. David Brooks was standing against the pear-tree trunk as the announcement was made, and seeing the effect it produced, he was unable to resist the temptation to cap it, and so he stepped up to Dan Stott, the conductor, and said, "Ay, Aw went o'er to Wiskit Hill yesterday, an' yur baancin' oboist's a marrit mon."

Now Wiskit Hill, though only a little more than three miles from Slagden as the crow flies, was nearly five by road, and as the footpath across the moor was only available in the fine weather, there was little connection between the two places. The moorland village was entirely agricultural, and belonged to another Methodist circuit. When it wanted to communicate with the outer world it did not come towards the Aldershaw valley, but went in the opposite direction. Remote and isolated under ordinary circumstances, there was little to bring it into connection with Slagden, and this had been one of the elements of surprise and speculation in the coming of the oboist; only his violent

attachment to Milly seemed a sufficient explanation. As a matter of fact Dan Stott had been to the Wiskit Hill "Sarmons," which were very early in the year, and having met the oboist there, got into conversation with him about musical instruments, the upshot being that Dan had "borrowed" the player. He had come, as we know, and the rest was attributable to the notorious colloging ways of the mangle girl.

But for his "carryings on" with Milly the chapel people might have regarded him as an acquisition, for even the most prejudiced could not but admit that his playing helped the music. There was something about his manner, however, that irritated them, and the fact that Milly seemed to prefer him to village-born young fellows increased the prejudice against him. As we have already seen, there were those who for their own private reasons were ready to believe the worst about him. It will readily be imagined, therefore, with what open-eyed astonishment the bulk of those present at the gable-end received David's statement. Saul stood back to survey the scandalmonger from head to foot; then he took a long severe glance around upon the company, and at last, facing his man with stern, wrathful countenance, he cried, "Theer! tha's getten it aat at last! Goo wesh thi dirty maath aat, thaa tan-tatlin' blether-skite!"

"Ay, an' wesh thi dirty little sowl tew," added Seth,—"if tha hes one."

Opinion was clearly divided; but as those in

sympathy with David were either young or of no particular account, and others dare not show their real thoughts in the presence of such stern rulers, the two elders carried the day, and David was glad to slink off down the fold, though with fires of rage burning within him.

But this was too fine an opportunity to be lost: as he watched the retreating form, the pulpit afflatus descended upon the schoolmaster, and so, glancing round to claim general attention, he announced, "A felley as gets his noase put aat i' courtin owt be as fain as t' chap as missed his train when ther' wur a collision, an' a felley as conna tak' his luck loike a mon, but goos yowlin' an' lyin' abaat him as licked him, owt to marry a widder an' be henpecked aw his days." With which piece of crooked philosophy Saul cocked his nose into the air and stalked off home to tea, leaving the rest to discuss as they pleased this last and most unsavoury bit of gossip. On the Tuesday following, the heavy rain of the morning having cleared the way for a soft fragrant evening, Billy Whiffle, Seth, and the schoolmaster had the gable-end to themselves, and sat placidly discussing recent events. Billy seemed absent-minded and unaccountably nervous, and Seth was still in the doldrums, and sighed and shook his head again and again. The village was unusually quiet for the hour, and the groaning and creaking of the mangle could be heard distinctly. Except two or three women on their way to the Mangle House there was not

a soul in sight, and when two youths emerged from the stable of the "Dog and Gun" and crossed the road slantwise towards the end of the lane leading down to Weaver's Yard, Billy shot apprehensive glances at his companions and burst into abrupt and rapid talk. Then Jim Gratrix, Fat Sarah's son, hurried by with something under his coat, and he was followed by two boys looking very sly and sheepish, and bearing bundles suspiciously like old clothes. Billy talked more rapidly and disconnectedly than ever. Then three or four of what Saul would have called "th' scum" slunk out of the public-house and went down the road, and these too turned into Weaver's Yard Lane. Saul had commenced a long rigmarole story about the way he had "dress't knots off" a brother local who had preached a particularly lame sermon: Billy had the air of a man who was listening to —something else.

Some time passed; all seemed quiet and peaceful, and Saul was still droning away at his yarn, when Billy noticed a pole coming up the old road, though he was seated too low to be able to see the person who carried it. Making a pretence of standing up to stretch himself, Billy saw that the person with the pole was Tommy Rodney, the clogger's apprentice, and he was accompanied by a shorter youth, wearing an old tin can for a hat. Both these, when they came to the lane end, turned hastily down the yard. A minute later a sound like that produced by a badly blown cow's

horn broke the stillness, and Billy breathed a sigh of thankfulness when he observed that neither of his cronies noticed it. The sound was repeated at intervals, each recurrence being a signal for Billy to give a little gasp and then endeavour to conceal it. He now noticed children and grown-up people hurrying down the ginnel into the chapel yard, from whence by a sort of back alley they could reach Weaver's Yard. The locality in question was the lowest quarter of Slagden and the dwelling-place of the Slagden neer-do-weels, and Billy, putting this and that together, became exceedingly alarmed. Then there was an intermittent clattering of clogs in the distance, and a medley of shouts and attempts at cheering. Saul lifted his head with a look of inquiry, but contented himself with the observation that "Th' days is takkin' in." The sounds grew louder and more frequent, and Billy was in a fever of anxiety. A strange quiet fell all at once upon them, the rumbling of the mangle in the house behind had ceased for the night, and the distant sounds had apparently dropped. Three women with clothes-baskets came round the corner and stopped for a moment to chat.

Billy was straining his ears for other sounds. As the baskets moved away Seth turned to remark upon the stillness of the evening, and Billy began an oddly confused speculation that the people were gone to the moors for whimberry. A sudden burst of horns and clanking cans brought him hastily to his feet, and standing before the

others so that they could not see straight before them, he suddenly remembered a litter of young pigs of special breed which he had, and began eagerly to press them to inspect the wonderful stock. All unconscious of what was forward, and without considering how unusual an hour it was for the inspection of animals, Saul and his friend allowed themselves to be led off, and not a moment too soon ; for as they disappeared down the chapel ginnel there came trooping out of the lane end, farther down the road, a shouting, rollicking little crowd, with tin cans, old frying-pans, and superannuated trays for drums, and cow's horns, triangles, and partially disabled fiddles for musical instruments. In the midst of the rabble, mounted upon two poles, were two figures, male and female, and all the " wastrils " of the village followed after in mock procession. Some were waving red cotton handkerchiefs on sticks, some were singing snatches of old comic songs, and others were trying to obtain possession of the extemporary musical instruments borne by companions. It detracted somewhat from the success of the demonstration that there were no houses on the road where they merged into the highway except Seth Pollit's little farm, and that stood back so far that it might as well not have been there. As the shouting crowd, with its clanging drums and groaning horns, proceeded, however, women, big girls and boys, and even men came running from all points of the compass, whilst every loafer in the " Dog and Gun," together with the servants and grinning landlord,

came out to see the fun. Some of the spectators cheered, others began to cry shame, women darted in and out of the procession in vain endeavour to capture children and drive them home, and bigger children amused themselves by dodging into the way of the pursuers and so impeding them; but these in most cases were fallen upon fiercely, and quickly blended their voices with all the other discordances in loud protest against boxed ears and slapped shoulders. As they came forward some of the spectators began to clamour to each other for explanations, the noise increasing every moment, and the confusion becoming more and more unmanageable. The horns blared, the cans clashed, and the figures on the poles swayed to and fro in imminent danger of upsetting altogether. It was scarcely light enough to distinguish the figures, and the imitations had not been very artistically done, but as the procession came near the fold end certain peculiarities in the female's dress, and a rude imitation of a musical instrument in the man's hands, cleared away all doubt, and as the mob, now passing the fold, wheeled round in the road right opposite the Mangle House with a sudden deafening crescendo from the players, Milly Scholes, with startled wonder in her face, flung the door open to realise in one terrible glance that her neighbours were offering to her the last and lowest dishonour a Lancashire woman of those days could suffer, "The Riding of the Stang."

CHAPTER XIII

JESSE TO THE RESCUE

ONLY once in her short life had Milly witnessed one of these old-fashioned and now happily obsolete demonstrations, but the sight had left an indelible impression on her mind, and she stood in the doorway for a moment paralysed with sudden overwhelming horror. The easily recognised effigy of the oboist had revealed to her in a flash the sinister significance of what was taking place, and she felt every inch of her weary body tingle with the blush of burning shame. For the moment her heart stood still, and she could have dropped where she was. Then there came the rush of a great indignation, and she turned to face the jeering mob: there was the whiz of a missile, and a heavy thud! thud! on the door behind her, as clods and cabbage-stalks flew past her head and fell to the floor. Quick as lightning she sprang back, flung open the door again, and darting out and closing it, drew in the shutter of the mangle-room window. Then came a crash and a shiver of glass, a stone had gone into the herb shop, and with a heart-breaking cry she

slammed the door, shot the bolts, and dashed into the other room to protect her father. Outside was a perfect bedlam: the battery of clods was still pelting at the door, horns blowing, tins beating, and fiddles scraping, and the sounds from these all mixed with shouts, protests, scoldings, and coarse laughter, until a raucous voice roared out some instruction, a cracked bell began to ring, and Abe Smiley, an ale-house sot and a wife-beater, was raised on high and began to bellow for order. The effigies were brought forward at his command, the middle of the road was cleared, and the uplifted ringleader, after ringing his wretched bell again, gave out, in whining imitation of a preacher, "Hymn seventy-twelve!"—

"Ring a ding dong,
Come list to my song,
An' sattle me this if yo' con:
What ta dew wi' a woman,
A brazzen-face rum un,
As is courtin' an owd marrit mon!"

There was more of this wretched doggerel, but it was much too coarse to be inserted here. As the orator read on he got confused by the bad light and the increasing tumult about him, and so gave a signal to the effigy-bearers. There was a shout and a cheer, the carriers made a dash at the Mangle House with the evident purpose of knocking the panels of the door in with the end of their poles. One terrible thunge had been given, and they had retreated for a second rush, when

suddenly springing from no one knew where, came a little crooked figure, which in two agile bounds sprang before the door and shrieked out, with streaming hair and uplifted clenched fist, "Do, if yo' dar', yo' tipsy wastrils! Th' fost as cums here 'ull get wot he'll ne'er forget, Aw'll tell yo'!"

There was a pause, a sudden silence, a burst of curses, another signal, and the effigies, rocking and shaking until they were nearly upset, were rushed forward towards the door. Tet flung her hands out with a scream of defiance, there was the cry of a man's voice from the gable-end, a sudden rush, a scurry of struggling youth, and just as the battering-ram with its shaking freight was coming down upon poor Tet, it was flung rudely aside, the carriers went sprawling into the dust, the crowd rolled back in panic, and Jesse Bentley stood on the doorstep, putting Tet behind him to screen her, and glaring defiance at the angry demonstrators. Jesse was neither tall nor particularly strong, but there was a look of cool determination on his face which had its influence upon the crowd, and the surging, only half-serious mob drew back and stared.

"Smoor him!" shouted a voice.

"Knock him through th' dur!" cried a second.

"Touch him if yo' dar'!" screamed Tet, shaking her fist from behind him.

There was a push from the back of the crowd, the rear cheered, the drums beat a sharp ran-tan! Jesse, with set teeth and flashing eyes, struck out right and left, and cleared a ring before him; the

pole-bearers coming forward with their effigies, sprang back to avoid his fist, those behind pushed again, and in a second, figures, poles, and bearers came tumbling down upon the brave defender and nearly buried him. With a wriggle and a tug, Jesse rose again above the limp and ruined dummies, set his foot upon them, and struck out right and left; whilst the crowd, making a mad rush, that would have trampled both him and his crippled companion under foot, were suddenly arrested by a pair of gesticulating, breathless figures, who, puffing and panting, sprang into the turmoil and cried, "Shame on yo'! Shame o' yur faces!" at the top of their voices. It was all over then; the authority of the two elders was beyond calculation greater than anything they could do, and half satisfied with their demonstration, and half intimidated with the gathering number of respectables, the rioters began sullenly to give way, and presently stood in little knots on the other side of the road, contenting themselves with beating on their drums and raising pandemonium with their discordant instruments. Several of the more peaceable of the spectators were now gathered round Saul Swindells, who was pouring out unheard-of denunciations upon the breakers of the peace, and threatening direful vengeance if they did not at once disperse. The demonstrators, at first inclined to abandon their enterprise, now began to fling back defiance at the objurgatory Saul, and preparations were already being made for a renewal of the attack,

when a little dark figure darted across the open space towards a remote corner where some dim forms could be seen; there was a sharp cry, an amazed shout, an infuriated scream, and Tet was seen dragging David Brooks forward by the hair, and giving vicious little punctuatory lugs as she screamed out her opinions of him. Nothing is so whimsical as a crowd, and the first little gasps of alarm for the sufferer were soon lost in loud roars of laughter, whilst here and there somebody cried, "Go it, Tet!" David, with his head down, was striking out wildly at the agile, scolding little woman, and a ring was formed round the struggling pair. Saul, however, broke in upon them and rescued his strange foster-child, and the spectators began to threaten David what they would do if he hurt her. Some of the onlookers were scandalised by the attack, and began to rebuke the excited Tet; but the rioters, delighted with the accuracy with which she had "spotted," and the pluck with which she had chastised the real but secret instigator of the stang riding, cheered, and eventually thrust themselves between David and the little termagant when he would have turned upon her to strike her. Then some one suggested the burning of the effigies, and a rush was made to recover possession of them; but as a fire could not be kindled in the highway, especially in the presence of so many supporters of law and order, the figures were carried off to an opening on the roadside, just opposite the milk farm, and a little above the

lane end which led to Weaver's Yard. The drawing off of the rabble with their blaring instruments left the others to themselves, several women and a man or two gathering round Tet, whilst Billy Whiffle and Seth were giving David a "piece of their minds"; for Tet's action had opened their eyes, and pointed out the real author of this disgraceful disturbance.

Never since that dreadful Sunday in the time of the "Reform," when Seth and Saul, armed one with a flail and the other with a pikel, defended the old chapel from those who would have taken unlawful possession of it, had slumberous old Slagden been so excited as on this occasion; and when the younger folk, attracted by the fire, made for the lane end, the elders and the females left together about the Mangle House gathered in scandalised little knots, and poured into each other's ears various and conflicting versions of the incident and its causes. Tet, still panting and haggard, experienced the most unusual sensation of being admired and flattered by her own sex—a change of treatment so extraordinary that it produced, as we shall see presently, remarkable effects upon the mind of the deformed girl; whilst David had now gathered round him another group more in sympathy than the last, and was pouring out his grievances in sulky, wrathful language.

In the meantime Maria Bentley and the shy Emma were going from group to group in search of Jesse, who was not to be found anywhere. The fact was, when the distraction caused by

Tet's impetuous attack upon David occurred, Jesse had turned his attention to the inmates of the Mangle House, and by knocking, softly at first, but with increasing force when there was no response, and loud whispered calls through the keyhole, he had endeavoured to get into communication with Milly—but all his efforts were in vain. Then he remembered the back door, and cautiously crept round. Here for five minutes he stood rattling the sneck, tapping at the door, and whispering through the keyhole imploring little calls to Milly to open, or at least speak to him. For any answer he got, the house might as well have been empty. Jesse grew anxious; he did not know the details of what had occurred, but he had trodden on pieces of glass near the front door, and he had been told that Milly was on the step when some of the spectators had arrived on the scene, and he was filled with all sorts of apprehensions as to what might have happened. Like every other Slagdenite, he had always been very suspicious of the oboist, and had heard all the discreditable suggestions which had been made about the two. That very night Maria had told his quiet sister, Rachel, in his hearing, and with the evident purpose of informing him rather than the other, that the Wiskit Hill man was married, and he had felt at the moment so sore at Milly's ill-treatment of him, and so anxious to justify himself to his own conscience for his recent flirtations with Emma, that he thought he believed the wretched stories. But now, with Milly in dis-

grace and perhaps injured, he knew that he never had believed them, and that if even they had been true Milly was, and always henceforth would be, more than any other person on earth to him.

"Milly! M-i-l-l-y!" he called again, and then, jamming his ear to the keyhole, he held his breath and listened. There was the distant shouting of the effigy-burners, a murmur of voices at the gable-end, but not a sound of any kind from within. They couldn't be both injured. Milly was just the person to decline to explain, and refuse meddlesome offers of sympathy; but the thought of how her silence would be interpreted in the village excited him, and, with a fretful, protesting sort of sigh, he stood back and gazed helplessly at the inexorable door.

There was a soft rubbing sound, like the sliding of a window sash, and a voice, that thrilled him as he recognised it, called "Jesse!"

He sprang eagerly at the window, but it was only an inch or two open, and when he tried to push it he felt that it was being firmly held.

"Milly, is that thee? Dunna be feart; they're gone. Let me cum in." As he spoke he gave another tug at the sash, but it did not move, and he could neither see nor feel the hand that held it.

"Jesse!"

"Ay, Aw'm here. Let me in, wench. Art hurt?"

There was a pause and a little long-drawn sigh; she was evidently not many feet away from him, and he pulled again at the window.

"Jesse, dust believe this—this—ere——?"

"Believe—er—a— Aw dunna know—Neaw!"

But before he could get his hesitating denial out, the window had been closed, and dark though it was, he saw the narrow little blind fall to the glass again.

"Milly, dunna goo! Aw dunna! Aw dunna believe!"

There was no response, and he was calling himself every opprobrious name he could think of. Then he sprang at the window and shook and tugged at it, but the only answer he got was the soft screwing in of the cotter. He put his face to the glass and pleaded, he threatened to burst in the window, he put his shoulder to the door and tried to force his way in, but all in vain; and as he dare not make too much noise, for fear of attracting the notice of the gable-end gossips, he at last retreated in self-accusing despair down the old garden, and, climbing the wall at the bottom, crept round as quietly as possible into the road, to wait and watch in secret for any opportunity of helping, or any sign that help was not required.

Down the road the bonfire was dying down, and the rioters were already dispersing, but at the gable-end a group of villagers were still discussing the situation. The active perpetrators of the outrage were ignored, they had acted after their kind; but David Brooks was universally condemned, and Tet, basking in the unusual sunshine of popularity, was regarded as the executor of the public vengeance. About Milly, opinion was divided;

and in this situation all the peculiarities of her character and conduct were sifted as evidence, confirmatory or otherwise, of the innuendo which was the immediate cause of the demonstration. Seth and Saul, muttering together, painted in sympathetic colours the dishonour done to the "S'ciety," for such a thing as the riding of the stang for a "joined member" had never been heard of before. Billy Whiffle, a constitutional wobbler, wouldn't have believed it of Milly; and when Seth and Saul turned fiercely upon him, he made haste to add, "An' Aw con hardings believe it yet."

Dan Stott, burdened with the responsibility of having introduced the oboist to Slagden, was anxious to find some one with whom to divide the unhappy distinction, and so he hinted that Milly had never been like any other wench, and the blacksmith added, "It's an owd sayin' an' a true un, wheer ther's smook ther's feire."

"Reet or rung, they'n browt it on thersel's wi' ther cluseniss; they'n lived i' that haase eight ye'r, an' noabry knows yet why they coom theer;" and Billy looked quite injured and defiant.

"An' hur fayther's that respected up an' daan; th' villige 'ull ne'er get o'er this," said Dan solemnly.

"Wee'st be a disgrace to th' Circuit."

"Th' pappers 'ull aw be full o' this."

But Saul had listened as long as he could, "Yo' ninny hommers! Yo' blethering num-yeds! Why, if Aw thowt——" But the hand which the schoolmaster had lifted to give due

emphasis to what he was going to say stopped in mid air, and Saul, with the dawn of a vast amazement on his face, gaped at his companions in complete motionless bewilderment; for at that instant there came through the soft night air, in full, rich, but tremulous tones, evidently proceeding from the barred and bolted cottage behind them—

"I'm a pilgrim and a stranger,
Rough and thorny is the road,
Often in the midst of danger,
But it leads to God;
Clouds and darkness oft oppress me,
Great and many are my foes,
Anxious cares and thoughts distress me,
But my Father knows."

They did not need to catch the words, the song was a favourite at the time; but there, in that still air, and after those turbulent scenes, it rose and fell, strange, thrilling, almost weird, like the song of some wandering spirit, and as man after man with amazed, struggling looks turned from the group to wipe away a tear, Saul, standing there with arm still uplifted and face struggling with every possible phase of strong emotion, cried at last, with shaking, choking voice, "Aw wodna believe it naa, if it wur proved to me; neaw if it wur proved a million times o'er."

And, as he finished, another voice, that of Jesse Bentley, came from across the road in startling, passionate protest, "Neaw, nor me noather, Saul."

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER WORM THAT TURNED

THE milkman's wife was a woman of much tribulation. Tied to a hard-hearted, utterly heedless man, she recognised that she was appointed to be made perfect through suffering, and if the number and intensity of her trials counted for anything she must have attained already a very advanced state of Christian maturity. Married people were supposed to reduce the burdens of life by dividing them, but, as she had remarked scores of times, she had never known an hour's peace since the fatal day when, with unsuspecting innocence, she gave her hand to the helpless but utterly hardened seller of milk. Household cares were enough, surely, for any ordinary woman, but in her case they had been combined with all the worries and anxieties connected with the business. Not a cow could be bought or sold, or a calf reared, or an unsatisfactory customer brought to book, unless she attended to it herself; her husband, instead of being an assistance, was the greatest burden of all. His mind was as wooden as his face, and

but for her constant, but thankless, watchfulness they would have been "i'th bastile" long ago. She had commenced her married life like so many other poor innocent young girls, with the confidence that she could "mak' summat on him"; but when a man listens to wifely admonitions with a face "as simple as a hayp'oth o' traycle in a weshin' mug," and as "dateliss as a rubbin' pooast"; when the only response is a low-hummed, indistinguishable tune; when a man coolly pulls out his pipe when you are talking to him "as sayrious as a cowd chizil," and falls back inevitably on a squawking buzzer of a bassoon; what can even "the quietest wench as iver wur made" do, but regard herself as an ill-used, prematurely worn-out, matrimonial martyr?

Their business was conducted on ancient and highly respectable principles: none of your custom-coddling carrying of milk round in a cart; the villagers were expected to come for their milk, and to be thankful they could get it then. But even here Seth's contrary "fawseniss" came out, for there were certain customers, and these not large or important consumers either, but mere old women on the parish and such like, to whom he persisted in carrying the milk, and the worst of it was that, though endowed with very special financial gifts and a good memory, she never could reckon up these particular accounts, the explanations he gave being of such a confusing nature that she could make neither "end, side, nor middle of them." As a self-respecting wife she

had met for years in her husband's class, but after a time he fell into the singular habit of not replying to her very full and unctuous experiences, and one night, after she had been describing herself as "coming out of great tribulation" and "washing her robes," this cold-blooded husband had shown his utter lack of sympathy and total unfitness as a spiritual guide by remarking, after a series of mysterious grunts, "Ay, them roabes o' thine tak's a seet o' weshin'; they must ha' bin in a bonny pickle when tha started." There was nothing for it after this but to transfer herself to Saul's class, but here she soon discovered that she had got "out of the frying-pan into the fire," and so had lapsed into a mere "payin'" member. Even these heavy troubles might have been endured, only the poor, suffering, persecuted soul got no sympathy. The giddy, short-sighted world, as represented by the villagers, thought there was nobody like Seth Pollit; every old woman brought her troubles to him, and every man in perplexity consulted him, whilst she, the patient, suffering wife, was treated as a person of no account at all!

But the worm will turn, and when nothing she could say or do induced him to take sides against Milly Scholes, she concluded that he was as much "bewitched" by the mangle girl as the most susceptible young fellow in the neighbourhood. The time for sterner measures had come. She had watched the riding of the stang from the middle of the farmyard with a certain grim satisfaction, but

when the demonstrators came and set fire to the effigies nearly opposite the farm gate, near enough, at any rate, for sparks to blow upon the new and as yet unthatched haystack, and there was no Seth at hand to take the proper precautions, she felt that patience would be criminal to herself, and resolved gloomily to let him see "wot sooart of a markit he's browt his pigs tew." She had seated herself two or three times and tried to knit, but the activity of her mind communicated itself to her body, and she remembered first one little job and then another that required her attention; to say nothing of the nervous little excursions she had to make every five minutes or so to see that nothing was happening to the stack. It was getting late, but there were no signs of Seth, and her indignation rose moment by moment.

She nearly fell over Bob the sheepdog, and gave him a spiteful kick; he was so much like his master in his stolid, immovable ways. She raked the fire, scrutinised the clock again, stood still every now and again to listen for a slow shuffling footstep that never came, and finally demanded from the dog what he thought about "yond rumgumpious mestur o' thoine." But Bob was as "dateliss" as his master. Half-past ten, a quarter to eleven: the voices in the distant road had died down, and the fire was smouldering out. The clock gave a struggling, spasmodic warning, as though afraid to hint at the actual time, whilst the dog got up and whined to be let out—he, too, preferred leaving her. Her mind

was made up at last; there should be no more "shilly-shally wark"; the heedless Seth should find out that even the poor despised worm of a wife could turn. She got up and bolted the door, drew the cotters of the window and fastened them, lighted a candle, and with her sharp features set into sorrowful but relentless purpose, mounted the creaking stairs to bed. For a person so absolutely decided she acted somewhat oddly when she reached her room, pausing every moment to listen for a click of the yard gate. The room was flooded with silver moonlight, and as this softened somewhat the eerie feeling which night always brings with it, she became firmer every moment, and began to prepare in earnest for rest. The clock below, after many preliminary buzzings, struck reluctantly out eleven slow strokes, as though quite aware what a reflection its announcement was upon the master of the house. She blew out the useless candle, stood once more to listen, deliberately drew on her spotless nightcap, and got into bed. Not a sound could she hear but the ticking of the clock below, and there was soon nothing of her visible but the point of her long thin nose. Soft self-pity began to steal over her; she was a neglected, overburdened sufferer, for whom nobody cared, and a little tear struggled out of the corner of her eye. A quiet, dreamy feeling crept over her, and—it must have been the heavy griefs that crushed her—she was dozing, when suddenly she sat bolt upright and listened.

Yes, it was the gate at last, and the shuffling feet she had heard so often. He came as though it had been the middle of the afternoon. She held her breath, something as near to a smile as she ever permitted passed over her face, she took her sharp elbows in opposite palms and hugged them. Seth was now to find out that there was an end even to her downtrodden meekness. He was on the back-door step, was trying the latch; Martha hugged herself in grim, sardonic triumph. There was a pause, a step or two on the flags, a thud! thud! on the window; he was knocking at the panes with the clothes-prop. She could have laughed out; this was better even than she had expected. The knocking ceased, the steps receded, there was the sound of a voice and the rattle of a chain; he was fastening the dog up. Then he tried the door again—ah! drat the wretch, he was actually humming "What must it be to be there?" Another experiment with the prop, and if he only had *not* hummed that tune she might have relented. The prop failing, he tried coughing — loud challenging coughs, only there were queer quavers in them as though he were laughing. Another pause, and then a long peculiar whistle with three odd and significant crotchets in the middle of it. Martha's face softened; an old farmyard, and certain sly corners therein, came floating back to her mind—the home where she was born and from which she had been married. She saw again a wall-faced but delightfully impudent and persistent young

lover. It was the old courting call that she had not heard for many a long year, and she listened as to enchanting melody. For that sweet sound she forgot everything, forgot even that Seth was on the wrong side of the door. Oh, to hear it just once more! but there was nothing now but the sound of retreating footsteps. Why, he was going! locked out of his own house! Startled and amazed, she nipped her elbows to her sides and strained her ears. Dead silence. He had gone; he had left her; she had gone too far with her naggling ways at last. "Seth! Seth!" she cried, and was just springing out of bed when the still air trembled with a distant quavering "Zoo —zoo—zoo—zoo!" In an instant she had shot her feet to the bottom of the bed, lugged the bedclothes over her head, leaving a scornful nose pointed towards the bed-hangings to show the disgust and wrath she felt. She never had intended to keep him out, only to frighten him; but now—she listened again, and heard nothing but the buzz of that crazy instrument. That bassoon should be burnt if she lived until morning! Then she realised that he would probably blow that wretched thing all night, for he forgot time, and wife, and everything else, when once he got the mouth of that plaguy instrument between his lips. No, that she wouldn't! she would stay where she was, if he played until doomsday!

The music was still groaning away; yes, she would get up for decency's sake, she would let

him in; but, when he did come inside, she would give him—but the music had ceased, and she sat up to listen. She heard Seth's footsteps in the yard, and at the same instant the outer gate clicked and there was a sound of light clogs. The clogs were not his: who was coming at this hour? A voice, a woman's voice! Lawk a massy! and Martha could not have moved to save her life. There was talk, low murmuring talk, of people who were trying to avoid being heard. Martha's heart stood still, and then began to bump up into her very ears. The female was protesting, Seth was reassuring and comforting. Heavens! was she to stand this? They began to move away; footsteps could be heard going down the yard. She jumped to the floor. Oh for a window on that side of the house! She darted here and there for wrappings, sprang down the stairs, fumbled and lost precious seconds with the fastenings, darted down the yard past the shippon, and looked. Not a sign, not a creature, male or female, could she see.

"Seth! Seth!" she cried; but there was no answer. She started forward to the gate, but her knees shook under her and she was compelled to stop, whilst remorse and severest self-condemnation swept over her spirit. The pettish, spoilt-childishness in her was all gone now, and she welcomed the blessed little suggestion that somebody had fetched her husband to a sick horse or cow with almost desperate gratitude. Yes! that explained

everything; Seth had known that he was likely to be called up as local emergency farrier, and that was why he had not hurried home. Her grievances were gone, all her injuries forgotten as though they had never been; he would be returning soon and need refreshment, and so, activity being so sweet an escape from terrible fear, she was soon blowing up the fire and fussing about the house, that he might have hot coffee and oatcake on his return. If only it had been a man that had fetched her husband; for a woman to do it was not usual, but still there were precedents for it, and she hugged them to her sore, self-angry heart. The coffee was ready, the oatcake on the table, and as she knelt toasting at the fire the old whistle came back to her, and a great penitent tear splashed unheeded upon the bright fender. The cheese ready, she sat down and began to speculate who it was likely to have been who had fetched Seth. The slow minutes dragged along, half-hour after half-hour passed away, the first streaks of dawn began to show themselves, and in spite of herself she was dozing over the fire, when she started up at the sound of distant wheels. But the conveyance did not turn in at the yard; it passed, it was going farther, and she ran to the door and held it open as she listened. The trap had stopped; she snatched up an old horse-rug, skipped lightly down the yard and up towards the gate. One moment she stood gaping through the dusky light, and then prejudice, jealousy, anger, all came

rushing back in a torrent, as she caught sight of her husband leaving a conveyance and entering that dishonoured Mangle House.

There were half a dozen simple, natural explanations of this procedure which in another mood would have occurred to her, but she had ceased to be able to think candidly where Milly Scholes was concerned, and that Seth should be giving sympathy and assistance to the girl upon whom the village had so recently passed emphatic sentence was intolerable to her. It was all Milly; not content with robbing other girls of their sweethearts, frustrating pretty little family matrimonial arrangements, and setting the village youths by the ears, she must needs come between her and her husband. She would never have thought of locking him out, he would have been in bed by her side, and she would have heard all about the reasons for this midnight summons but for that "powsement." For half an hour she paced about the kitchen, conjuring up all sorts of grievances, and enlarging them; all the more so perhaps, that at bottom she knew there was nothing seriously wrong. Presently she heard the gate again; Seth was coming home. She moved toward the door, hesitated, her hand on the latch; but he did not come. He turned in at the shippon, and she heard him talking to the cows. She would go to bed!—no, she would catch him red-handed; he would have some fine tale concocted if she waited until morning. And so, quietly turning the key and stealing out, she came upon that wooden,

imperturbable man, the raised lid of the bin in one hand and the hateful bassoon in the other. The lid fell with a bang, the instrument slid to the floor, and he looked round with a guilty start. Grim and stern, she stretched out a hand and demanded, "Gi' me that stable keigh."

"Hay, wench, wotiver art doin' up at this—Drat my sawft yed, Aw ne'er towd thi, did Aw?"

"Gi'—me—that—keigh!"

"Aw ne'er thowt at it, Aw wur that flummaxed. Go i'th haase, wench; heigh thi!"

"Aw've bin i' this haase fur th' last toime; Aw'm goin' whoam."

"Oh ay! Aw'm sorry Aw've browt thi aat o' thi warm bed (no mention of the locking out). Go back ta bed, an' Aw'll bring thi a sooap a tay."

"Tha con tak' thi sups a tay to brazzened-faced wenches: if tha doesn't gi' me that keigh, Aw'll start an' walk it."

To her secret but utter amazement, he fumbled in his side-pocket, and handed the key across the door.

She let it drop to the ground, and stood there staring at him with stony visage and sudden fainting mind. She had threatened to return to her father's about once a quarter for eighteen years, but he had never taken her at her word before. With arms folded and face set, she surveyed him, unconscious of the fact that it was impossible to look dignified in her present habiliments. Seth realised it, however, and as he glanced slyly down towards the bassoon his

mouth began to draw to one side in that grotesque facial contortion which passed with him for a smile.

At last he raised his head, and said, "Th' trap 'ull want weshin'; go i'th haase an' get summat ta eight, w'oll Aw swill it a bit."

Stiff, stony, and contemptuous, she eyed him over, and then said, in slow, weighty tones, "Seth Pollit, tha's a hert like a weather millstone." She probably meant "nether," but her Scripture quotations were generally more faithful to sound than sense.

Blank, wooden, and expressionless was the face he turned up to her, his mouth began to contract sideways again, his eyes gleamed with sly fun, and in a soft, soothing voice he replied, "Ne'er moind, wench; my yed's sawft enuff."

There could be no answer to a remark like this; it was one of her own most frequent statements. But the situation was fast becoming ridiculous, and so, to save her dignity and bring him back to seriousness, she drew herself up again, and demanded, "Art goin t' tell me wot this disgraceful aw-neet-wark meeans?"

He eyed her again slyly, gave his mouth one more crooked twist, and then, in tones of sudden but fervent admiration, he cried, "Hay, wench, tha art a ripper i' them rags; tha lewks as prewd as a dog wi' a tin tail."

"Seth, tha'd mak' gam o'th Almighty Hissel'. Wheer'st bin aw neet?"

"Aw've bin ta Noyt'n, fotchin' th' doctor."

"Whoa fur?"

"Owd Nat Scholes; he's had a stroak."

There was a long painful silence; she glanced uneasily up and down the yard, with a long-drawn, contrite sigh. Not yet entirely conquered, however, she asked, "Is he bad?"

"Th' doctor shakes his yed, an' Milly's cryin' her een aat."

She stood a long time musing; she looked hard at Seth, harder at the cows, hardest of all at vacancy, and at last, with subdued voice and strange choky strugglings, she cried, with delightful womanly inconsistency, "That cums o' that scand'lous stang riding; they owt be locked up, the herd-herted wastrils! Cum i'th haase an' ha' sum brekfus;" and she turned round and sedately led the way.

Seth glanced around the shippon, bestowed a long expressive wink upon the bassoon, chuckled under his breath, and followed her indoors.

CHAPTER XV

PRELIMINARY SKIRMISHES

NOTHING ever disturbed the slumberous quiet of Slagden during the early parts of the day, but the stang riding and its sequel came as near to doing so as anything ever did. Generally you might pass along the high road in the fore or afternoon without seeing a soul or hearing anything but the occasional clang! clang! of Peter Jump's hammer. The men and young women were at work in the valley mills and did not come home to dinner. "Schooltime" gave a little temporary appearance of life, but beyond that there was little to disturb the sleepy calm. The stang riding, however, made a difference; women stood at cottage doors with arms folded in "brats," and exchanged views on the situation, and all the morning there was a little knot of men lounging about the smithy. Maria Bentley and Tizzy Brooks, who, as sisters of the rivals, had been for some time at daggers drawn, became sudden and violent friends, and the pretty Emma Cunliffe spent all the forenoon at Jesse's house; whilst that inveterate stay-at-home,

Martha Pollit, made two separate visits to the same cottage, joining as loudly as any one in denunciations of Milly, but running off into noisy but very vague declarations of what the Mangle House girl "desarved," when she was invited to co-operate in definite measures of persecution. By noon feminine opinion in the village had got itself crystallised: old Nat's spotless character, his wonderful skill with "yarbs," and, above all, his extraordinary sermons, were canvassed, and admiration and sympathy were lavished upon him; whilst the blame of all that had occurred, Nat's illness included, was laid upon Milly's shoulders, and she was finally condemned as "ta bad to brun." The few men, too, who were left in the village at this part of the day seemed as much disturbed as the women: Peter the blacksmith did practically nothing in the way of work, Seth called twice at the schoolhouse—a most extraordinary proceeding—and Saul returned his visits during dinner-hour. All afternoon, Martha, the milkman's wife, was tormented with that interminable "Zoo—zoo—zoo" of the bassoon. Never since they lost all their cows in the rinderpest had she known her husband resort to the comforting instrument so early in the day. She could not get a word out of him during "baggin'"; he seemed in a "ter'ble hurry" over his milking, and by five o'clock he was sitting and smoking at the gable-end in evident impatience for the councillors to arrive. Peter and Saul joined

him almost immediately, and the state of the latter's mind may be inferred from the fact that though he sat between the others and they were both smoking thick twist at a furious rate he did not make a single remark about tobacco, and did not even cough.

"Whoa's cumin' naa?" asked Peter, staring lazily down the road, and anxious for something to set them talking.

His companions followed his eyes in abstracted indifference, and Saul drawled out, "It lewks loike a scotchman [travelling draper]."

"Ger aat, mon! them jockeys doesna cum abaat as lat' as this: the'r' feert o'th husban's catchin' em," replied Peter, still watching the approaching stranger.

"Wheer's his pack?" asked Seth conclusively.

The new-comer still lounged along, glancing inquiringly up the lane that led to Weaver's fold and through the milkhouse gate as he passed. "It's happen wun o' them—them—tha knows —naturologists or summat—goin' on th' moor fur yarbs."

"Naturalists, tha meeans. Naa, he's no' gawmliss-lewkin' enuff fur them; an' wheer's his blew specs?"

But the stranger was too near for candid criticism, and, as he seemed disposed to approach, each man became a stony sphinx, and stared before him at the pear tree in profound abstraction.

"Good afternoon! Could you tell me where Mr. Pawkinson lives?"

"Parkyson? Parkyson?" and the three looked inquiringly at each other; and at length Peter, with sudden inspiration, replied, "Yo'n cum ta fur, mestur; Jeff Parkyson lives this end o' Noyt'n; he keeps a tradin'-hoile fur pidgins."

"It is a Mr. *William* Pawkyson I want."

Peter looked at Saul, and Saul at Peter; they both turned inquiringly to the laconic milkman, and all three shook their heads.

"He's a Methodist official of some sort."

Another inquiring exchange of looks, another solemn and most decided shaking of heads, and then, as a gleam of recollection shot into Seth's eyes, he opened his mouth to speak, checked himself, and then, assuming his most impenetrably wooden look, he asked suspiciously, "Wot dun yo' want him fur?"

"There's a Rutchart Parkyson at Billy Haases," interposed Saul; but Seth stopped him by a dig in the ribs and cried, "Shur up wi' thi! he meeans Billy Whiffle;" and then, turning to the stranger, he went on, "He's at his wark; he'll no' be whoam fur abaat an heaur."

Now whenever Seth departed from his usual taciturnity and claimed a leading part in the conversation, it was an indubitable sign that there was something forward, and so the two smokers retired into mere spectatorship, leaning back and adjusting their pipes in their mouths in anticipation of something interesting.

"Mr. Pawkinson is the chief official amongst the Methodists here, I understand?" said the stranger, looking calculatingly from one to the other of the cronies, and evidently speculating whether it might be safe to open his business to them.

"Ay, he's wun on 'em, an' ther's tew mooar here;" and Seth vaguely indicated his companions, who sat staring before them in stern efforts after a modesty of becoming seriousness.

"Oh, indeed! Well, a—a——" and the visitor drew out a pocket-book and took a step or two nearer as he spoke. "You've had an extraordinary occurrence here, I understand?"

He addressed himself to Saul and the blacksmith, but they knew better than reply, and Seth, dropping into a sad, regretful tone, made answer, "We han that; it's a ter'ble job for us. He wur a grand owd saint."

"*He?*—er—I—I thought it was a young woman!"

Dull, vague surprise was all Seth showed; another long shake of the head, and then a groaning repetition, "A grand owd saint!" punctuated by sympathetic groans from his supporters.

"But it *was* a young woman, wasn't it? They don't do that sort of thing to old men."

"Yung felley," and the milkman's voice expressed profoundest commiseration, "yo're a stranger abaat here."

"I'm a representative of the press—the *Alder-*

shaw Chronicle, you know—and I understood you had some sort of a—er—a—riot about here?"

Peter's foot, tucked far under the bench, gave Seth's clog a sharp kick, and a similar signal came from the other side of him. Neither, however, were noticed by the reporter.

Seth's face was as blank as a paving-stone, and so Saul leaned over and explained, "He says he's a newspaper felley."

"Oh ay! Well, Aw'm fain to see yo'. Ay, this is summat fur th' papper sure*li*. See as yo' put it in gradely. They think summat o'th owd chap, Aw con tell yo', daan i'th Aldershaw valley."

"Yes, yes! But what about the other matter—the disturbance, you know?" and the pressman began to get out his notebook.

"Disturbance?" and Seth stared blankly first at the stranger and then at his companions, and the latter, understanding perfectly what was required of them, put on looks of mingled amazement and indignation. Seth was still studying dazedly the end of the reporter's pencil, but at last, after a prodigious effort of memory, he turned to his friends, and in tones of profoundest pity for the reporter's gullibility he remarked, "He meeans that bit of a marlock th' lads hed las' neet."

Saul and Peter apparently could not recall the circumstance, but when at length they succeeded, they burst into amused, protesting laughs, as though to say that nobody *could* convince them

that the stranger had come all the way from Aldershaw after a trifle of that kind.

But the reporter was a little piqued and suspicious, and wanted to show them that he was not quite so green as they supposed, but already knew too much to be hoodwinked. And so he asked, "She's some sort of a singer, isn't she?"

"Singer? His dowter? Hoo is that! ther's nowt loike her i' this countryside. Poor wench! hoo's ter'ble ill off abaat it—an' so are we;" and Seth's solemn, anxious manner would have impressed the most callous. The pressman decided to give them rope; he could at any rate let them talk, and quietly bring them round to the topic he was interested in; and so for the next ten minutes Nat Scholes was receiving such a character as Slagden had never before given to one of its own. His wonderful preaching, his unique skill with "yarbs," and his high personal worth were so impressed upon the astute stenographer that he became interested in spite of himself. Pursuing his plan of leading them on, he asked presently—

"What is the nature of his accident?"

"Accident? Ger aat wi' yo'! He's hed a fit."

"A fit?" and the man of letters was writing rapidly.

"Ay, a parylistic fit—see as tha spells it gradely."

The stranger smiled, but advanced his next question with careful skill.

"Brought on by this excitement, I suppose?"

Seth apparently did not hear; he was revolving some important matter in his mind, and presently, after turning his pipe about in his mouth, he took it out, and with a face as innocent and inquiring as it was possible to make so expressionless a visage, he asked humbly, "They tell me as this 'ere parylism's browt on wi' th' brain brastin', when th' knowlidge-box gets ta full. Yo'n ne'er hed nowt o'th soort, Aw reacon?"

The reporter glared hard at his questioner, but it was impossible to get angry with that humble, lamb-like face, and so he swallowed his chagrin and tried again. It was of no use, however; the more he fenced the farther he seemed to get away from the point upon which he was so anxious to obtain information. He half closed his book, glanced around for any more likely informers, and was just turning away, when Peter drawled out, "If they starten a puttin' childer-wark loike that i'th papper, Aw know wun felley as 'ull give o'er takkin' it in;" and Saul, who was bursting for an innings, interjected, "Put that soort a babby-tales i'th news, an' that papper's busted."

The pertinacious newsman was not by any means convinced, but as the workpeople were now beginning to pass on their return from the mills and stared curiously at him, he put his book into his breast-pocket and turned disappointedly away. Billy Whiffle was amongst the starers, but the two cronies gave no more

sign that they knew him than if he had not been there. The conspirators watched the departing stranger with unmoved faces, and he certainly gave them reason enough—for he seemed in two minds whether to try some more likely source of information; and when he noticed, in passing, the charred remains of last night's fire he stood for a full minute wavering at the entrance to Weaver's Yard, but finally, admonished by a glance at his watch, he proceeded down the road.

That night all Slagden knew that a newspaper man had been to the village to inquire about the stang riding, and therefore when, late on Friday evening, the *Aldershaw Chronicle* came into the village, it was eagerly snatched at and carefully scrutinised. Alas for petty scandal-mongering! There was a long account of a "serious illness of a popular lay preacher," together with highly eulogistic notes about his character and preaching fame, but the only reference to Milly was a sentence at the end, to the effect that "Mr. Scholes, thanks to the assiduous attention of his devoted daughter—the young lady whose singing made such a sensation at the recent opening of the Aldershaw Co-operative Hall—was now out of immediate danger."

This disappointment, perplexing though it was, lost most of its edge in the presence of a much more exciting piece of information, namely, that the oboist had been over to the village and "welly shakken th' life aat o' Davit Brooks," and that David had gone to a lawyer with the inten-

tion of taking out a summons for assault against his assailant.

The night but one after the stang riding was the week-night service. The youngest of the three ministers was appointed, but just before five o'clock Maria Bentley came breathlessly to her friend, Martha Pollit, with the information that the "Shuper" had arrived and gone down to Hullet Fold to have tea with the Brookses; and as Seth came in at that moment for the milk-measures he heard the announcement. Information of this spicy nature was lost upon him, and Martha got no satisfaction out of purveying it. But Seth spent a full half-hour after he had served the milk with his bassoon, and, to judge by the doleful, lugubrious notes produced, either player or instrument must have been in a very bad way.

The Rev. Henry Harmsworth had the reputation of being a martinet, and, though he was now only finishing his first year in the Circuit, he had already acquired an uncomfortable notoriety for strict enforcement of rule. He had corrected several abuses too long tolerated by easy-going predecessors, and rescued more than one "trust" from legal embarrassment. The Circuit, therefore, was divided about him, for whilst some rejoiced in the improvements he had made, others were inclined to decry him as a meddler. About one thing, however, the Circuit had been unanimous; for whenever he had mentioned little Slagden there had been a sort of indulgent

grin, and he had been earnestly advised to "let sleeping dogs lie."

On their part, our Slagden friends had so far treated him with studious respect, and even when on the previous Christmas he had broken through an old institution and insisted on Seth, the seventeen-year-old steward, coming out of office, they had not shown any particular resentment. They had, however, as Saul phrased it, "tan th' length of his foot," and adopted the attitude of armed neutrality.

There was always a good attendance at the week-evening service, but on this occasion there were more present than usual, and when his reverence, glancing significantly around at the goodly array of officials present, announced that there would be a leaders' meeting at the close, he expected that there would be a full complement.

Billy Whiffle followed him into the vestry, rubbing his hands in evident satisfaction with the sermon just delivered.

"Excellent congregation, Mr. Steward; we should have a full meeting."

Billy, who was evidently not so confident, rubbed his hands together again, smiled apologetically, and ventured, "It's a busy part o'th ye'r, mestur, harvistin' an' sich loike."

"Yes, but they are here, and they cannot do any work at this hour."

Billy listened carefully, smiled again, and then, with a long, clinging, hand-washing operation,

he remarked, studiously avoiding his superior's eye, "Ne'er heed; yo'll be here ageean in a fortnit."

"But the business is important; it cannot wait. You—you have no reason to think they will not come?"

"Neaw! neaw!" cried Billy hastily; "they *met* cum, yo' know, they *met*."

"Might? Why not? You seem doubtful. Why shouldn't they come?"

"Ay, sartinly, whey not?——they'n happen furgetten."

Billy's helpless, propitiatory manner excited the minister's suspicion.

"Forgotten? Rubbish! You don't mean to say——" but as he spoke he flung open the door into the chapel, and his jaw dropped. The building was empty; there was not a soul to be seen. He strode to the side door and looked out. No, there was nobody coming round that way!

"Mr. Whiffle,"—even the Super did not know Billy's real name,—"what is the meaning of it?"

Billy, the picture of flurried guiltiness, wrung his hands, glanced round the room in anxious search for some answer, and suddenly, as his face lighted up with the flash of a blessed inspiration, he cried, "It's th' sarmon! It's nowt else! That sarmon's knocked th' meetin' clean aat o' ther yeds!"

The Super glanced Billy over with strong suspicion; but the dawn of a smile stole into the corners of his mouth in spite of himself, as

he looked into the other's convinced, emphatic face.

"Will Brother Pollit have gone home, think you?"

"Ay—if he hasna stopped at th' gable-end."

The Super knew enough about the gable-end to dislike it, and so, without even saying Good-night, he stalked off, intent upon unearthing the disloyal officials.

As he passed the pear tree he held down his head, but glanced up from under his frowning brows, and so discovered that the truants were not there.

The front door of the milkhouse faced the road, though at some little distance from it. It was approached through a wicket gate from the fold, and was only used by strangers. When the minister knocked at it, Martha herself answered the summons, and knew her visitor at once. She had, however, a grudge, or, to speak correctly, several grudges against the Super. He had put her husband out of office after he had held it all those years, he had never as yet called upon her, and always went to the Brookses' for his meals. Here, then, was her opportunity. In reply to his inquiry after Seth, she eyed him over critically and very deliberately, and then, in her most distant tones, informed him, "He's nor in: dun yo' want a bolus?"

"Er—a—no; I wanted to speak to him."

"Well, he's nor in; he's aat sumwheer. Is it owt pertic'lar?"

She kept him standing at the door, and gave not the slightest sign of recognition, in spite of his professional garb.

"You don't appear to know me, Mrs. Pollit."

"Know ya? Neaw,—yo're no' th' insurance felley, are you?"

"My name is Harmsworth, ma'am."

"Harmswo'th? Harmswo'th? Oh, yo'll be th' Noyt'n hoss doctor, happen?"

"I'm the Wesleyan minister, ma'am,"—this in his stiffest manner.

"Hay, goodniss! Cum in! Wot am Aw thinkin' abaat? Bud Aw us't t' know *aw th'* ministers afoor yo' coom. Yo'n ne'er bin here afoor, hau yo'?"

The minister swallowed the reproof as best he could, and replied, "Thank you, I'll not come in. Where could I find your good husband?"

"Hay! ta think as Aw didna know yo', an' yo'n bin here twelve munths! Cum in, an' Aw'll goo seek him."

But at this moment Peter Jump was seen going round the shippon end, and so, with a shrewd suspicion that if he followed he might find his quarry, the minister hurried away through the little side gate, and presently stood at the shippon door.

He was not disappointed. The blacksmith was just squatting down upon a milk stool, with Seth on one side and Dan Stott on the other, whilst Saul stood in the middle of the floor with a good-sized volume open in his hand.

"Gentlemen, what is the meaning of this? I called a leaders' meeting."

Saul, who was speaking, had not heard the Super's approach, and so he turned with a little start, and beheld his ecclesiastical superior leaning over the half-door. For the moment he was embarrassed, but recovering quickly, and accepting the gage of battle, he spread open the book upon his palm, placed a long finger on one of the paragraphs, and with thick-knitted brows and argumentative inclination of the head he demanded, "Wot Aw want ta know, Mester Shuper, is this: Is this 'ere constitutional?"

The minister prided himself on his knowledge of and attachment to the law, and so he drew himself up and asked, with no little stiffness, "What do you mean, sir?"

"Is that 'ere according to Cocker, leastways Grindrod?" and Saul glanced proudly round upon his companions to invite them to observe how he would "floor" the cleric.

"I'm the best judge of what is legal, Brother Swindells; but what are you referring to?"

"Aw'm talkin' abaat Grindrod's *Cumpendium*; theer it is, lock, stock, an' barril. Naa wheer arr yo'?" and the schoolmaster turned from the minister to his colleagues with a glance of conscious triumph.

(Grindrod's *Compendium* was in those days the standard authority on Methodist law and procedure.)

"What has Grindrod to do with your absence from the leaders' meeting?"

"Dew? Wur that theer meetin' gin aat o' Sunday, or wor it not?"

"How could it be? The circumstances had not arisen."

"Well, then, wheer's yor law? wheer's yor legalism? wheer's yor constitutionality? that's wot Aw want ta know?" and the last great word so inflated Saul that he took a step towards the minister that was almost menacing.

The minister drew himself up again, and as he glanced at the wooden faces of Saul's supporters it struck him that this extraordinary zeal for law was simply obstruction. Most villagers loved gossip and scandal. What was there behind this inconsistent action?

"Well, brethren, I think you might have trusted your Superintendent. I will call a *legal* meeting for next week. Good evening!"

The four conspirators listened to his retreating footsteps until they died away, and then Peter and Dan turned to each other with broad though somewhat sheepish grins. Saul, blown up with the consciousness of a wonderful victory, glanced round upon them and cried, "Theer! ther's wun mon goan whoam wi' his tail between his legs."

Peter looked at Dan and Dan at Peter, and then they both stole apprehensive glances at the stolid Seth. That worthy had apparently nothing to say, but pulled moodily at his pipe.

Just as Dan was wondering what the next move would be, Seth turned his eyes up to the still inflated Saul, and surveying him deliberately from head to foot, he remarked, in tones of crushing reproof, " Afoor Aw'd talked to mi betters as tha's talked to yond mon, Aw'd cut mi impident tungue aat."

CHAPTER XVI

MILLY AND TET

AND whilst Slagden was excited from end to end, as it had seldom been in its modest history, Milly was passing through the most painful possible experiences. She had thought some fortnight ago that her cup of trouble was full to the brim—that any change must of necessity be for the better; and lo! there had come upon her an overwhelming succession of disasters, by the side of which her former trials seemed as nothing. But the result was not collapse, as she would have prophesied, but astounded bewilderment. Saturated with the simple faith of Slagden Methodism, the relentless vindictiveness of Providence amazed her; the interpretation put upon her intercourse with the oboist amazed her more: but the most astonishing marvel of all was the effect these heavy sorrows had upon herself. The least introspective of persons, she suddenly found herself so perplexed with herself that she could think of nothing else. Cry? She was never farther from it, apparently, in her life; she wanted to laugh, to sing. Alas! poor soul, had

she known it, that was the most terrible sign of all. She seemed to take a sort of desperate delight in counting over the number and realising the completeness of the disasters that had overtaken her. Something of the old heaviness came upon her. She attended to her stricken father, moved his helpless limb, and watched his harrowing, pathetic efforts to articulate. But alone in the mangling-room again, a laugh, first bitter, then wildly hilarious, then defiant, broke from her, and in the midst of these frightening, incomprehensible impulses she clenched her hands, turned a frenzied face to the joists, and cried passionately, "Tha'll ha' ta bless me naa! Tha'll ha' ta bless me; fur ther's noa mooar ill Tha con dew me." When she became quieter, this perilous condition absorbed her completely. What could it all mean? Why was she like this? She was not—she was not going mad? But in these moments the frequent necessities of her father were veritable godsends to her. What education she possessed had been acquired in the easy sunny days when they had lived at the old farm, and, though better equipped than most girls of her acquaintance, she did not know enough to understand the significance of her condition; and, happily for her, the villagers had no alternative but to bring their mangling to her. Herbs, also, were required, and these things, together with the constant needs of her father, kept her hands fully occupied. A perceptible change also was coming over her appearance. Her skin became clear, her

eyes bright, and her manner so lively that the hearts of the villagers hardened towards her as they watched her. Never had she been so smart in repartee, never so bantering in speech and independent as in these days, so full of peril to her overwrought brain and heart. Nobody came to turn for her, and she retorted by announcing that until her father was better everybody must turn for themselves, or provide their own deputy. Maria Bentley and her friends were scandalised, and called her a "shameliss brazzenface," and even those disposed to show her sympathy, for her father's sake, sadly shook their heads. Little by little the various occurrences connected with the stang riding reached her, together with village comments thereupon; but she only laughed a mirthless laugh, and seemed the more determined to brave things out. Some things that were true, and many more that were not, were told over the mangling about the relationships existing between Jesse Bentley and Emma, and nothing surprised the garrulous gossips more than the hearty goodwill with which she always alluded to her rival. They did not know, slow-witted as they were, that she spent half the following night fighting down the demon of jealousy, and the other half in tortured wonderings as to what Jesse would be thinking about her. To her infinite relief, the inquiries made about her father's condition were distantly civil, for there was nothing she dreaded so much as that some one she really respected should

break her utterly down. It would only take a little—a very, very little; only a small word with the true ring of sympathy in it, and she was certain she would collapse. That word, however, was not spoken, and the only person who visited her, save mangling customers, was little Tet. Tet came on the Sunday afternoon, when the village was at its quietest, and Old Nat in one of his long heavy sleeps. Milly sat in the passage, with the door open because of the heat, and to be within hearing of her father's voice. There was mystery, importance, and ostentatious resignation in the cripple's manner, and, without a word of salutation or inquiry after Milly's patient, she squatted in the doorway, propped her back against the jamb, pulled down her short skirts, and heaved a sigh which was a most unmistakable challenge.

Except for a nervous, pathetic little attempt to swallow, Milly did not appear to have noticed her.

Another lugubrious groan, with a quick glint from under the pendulous eyelid; but Milly gave no response.

"It's cum ta summat at last. Tha's made a bonny mess on it."

Even yet the mangle girl, whose head was a little on one side, had not curiosity enough to ask the implied question or repel the implied charge.

"That cums o' helpin' yore neighbours; it sarves me reet."

The wicked-looking eyelid was nearly closed, but now it began to flicker a little, for Milly had given the first sign by slowly raising her head.

"Aw'm sorry fur thee—an' Emma; bud yo'n browt it on yursel's."

A slow, reluctant little smile was her reward; but Milly did not speak.

"Ne'er moind, wench; tha'st be mi brides-maid."

"Wot art talkin' abaat, Tet?" This in Milly's most weary tones.

"Aw'm talkin' abaat yond gawmliss chap o' thoine. Aw'st ha' ta wed him naa."

A little gleam of fun relieved Milly's wintry smile now, in spite of her heavy personal pre-occupation.

"Wed him? Wot fur?"

"Wot fur? Didn't he save mi loife at th' stang riding? They allis han ta wed 'em when they sav'n ther loives."

"Whoa says sa?"

"Th' bewks; it's allis that rooad i' th' tale-bewks. It's me density [destiny], tha knows."

Milly was trying not to smile. "Ne'er moind, wench; he'll happen, ne'er bother."

"Bother? Haa con he help it? It's *his* density tew."

After a moment's weary, unwilling effort to think, Milly sighed out, "Aw used think Jesse 'ud be my destiny."

"Ay, they aw dun at fost, an' then th' reet

un bobs up loike a rotten aat of a grid hoile, an' then wheer are they?"

Milly's head was leaning against the door. She mused with a wan, fast-fading smile, and then, with an air of gentle reproach, she said, "Aw didn't think as tha'd ha' tan him off me, Tet."

"Me! me! Dust think Aw want th' gawpy? Naa lewk here, Milly. Did thaa goo aw wimbly-wambly an eawt o' flunters fost toime as tha clappt thi een on him?"

Milly had known Jesse all her rememberable life, and so, with a despondent shake of the head, she answered, "Neaw."

"Did he catch thi on his chest when tha wur jumpin' aat of a runnin'-away carriage, or poo thi aat of a brunnin' haase, or owt o' that?"

"Neaw."

"An' did he iver poo thi aat big lodge bi thi bussle, when tha wur draanin' at th' deead o' neet?"

"Neaw."

"Neaw? Well, then, haa con he be *thy* density? Ha' sum sense, woman!"

Milly's smile faded again as quickly as it had come, and she was evidently musing sorrowfully. "Bud they sen as he's gooin' wi' Emma, tha knows."

"Ay, hoo's th' rivvle [rival], tha knows; bud he sav't mi loife, an' Aw'm his density, an' he'll cum tew his cake an' milk at th' lung length. They aw dun."

"An' wot does t'others dew when th' destiny turns up, loike?"

"Oh, they draan thersel's, or goo off it, or get wed ta sumbry else, or sum lumber;" and Tet announced the unhappy fate of the unsuccessful ladies of fiction with the utmost cheerfulness.

Milly's faint interest in the subject was already fading, however, and she was examining the hands on her lap with a far-off, dreamy look.

"Tet, dust think as Jesse loikes her?"

"Whoa? Emma? Hoo loikes him;" and then, another thought striking her, she went on reflectively, inclining her head, "Naa, Milly, dust caw Emma good lewkin?"

"Hay ay; hoo's pratty, Emma is;" and Milly lifted a long quivering sigh.

"As noice as me?"

Milly wanted to laugh, but a glance at the screwed-up, crouching bundle of anatomical odds and ends, which was poor Tet's apology for a body, made the tears come, and so, to escape the thoughts that rose, she took up the conversation again.

"Well, that's different, tha knows. Hoo's leet, and tha'rt dark."

"Ay, hoo's raythер weshed-aat, isn't hoo? They sen as hoo sups aligar an' weshes her face i' meyl-wayter ta mak' her lewk whoite. Sich floppery wark!"

Silence fell on them. Milly was struggling with a question she felt she ought not to ask. "Hast—hast—seen 'em togather?"

"Me? Hay neaw. Yo' han ta keep aat o' th' rooad o' yore densities, tha knows; bud they allis turn up when they'n let ther bant off."

Milly heaved another sigh, half playful, half real. "Hay dear! wot wi' thee an' wot wi' Emma, ther's noa chonce fur poor me."

She had been humouring her queer little visitor, in the vague hope of getting some information; but her heart was sick and despairing, and something of her mood must have crept into her voice, for Tet opened her good eye and fixed it searchingly upon her, whilst the lid of the other flipped at a frantic rate. It was another Tet, therefore, with another and much more sympathetic voice, that next spoke: "Milly, tha'rt no' breikin' thi hert o'er a felley—thee?"

Milly was too full to reply. It was the last and lowest humiliation of her present painful position that, from sheer lonely misery, she had to bare her heart to such an one as Tet. The little hunchback was scowling hideously, her demonstrative eyelid beating like a bee's wing, whilst she ransacked her brain for tale-book precedents for such a situation as presented itself to her.

"Dunna be sawft, woman. Aw wodna breik mi hert fur th' best mon as iver walked upa tew legs."

It was roughly said, and came from the queerest of all queer sources; but it was sympathy, and Milly had not had a word or felt a touch of sympathy for many a day, and in

spite of pride and scorn of herself, the dull, hard defiance which had been her last entrenchment for days broke utterly down, and tears—tears of precious healing value to her, had she known it—began to drop like rain on her white apron.

She remained thus for several minutes, Tet watching her with her ugliest frown.

"Tet, tha doesna believe wot—wot they sen abaat me, dust?"

"Do Aw heck!"

The cripple was screwing mouth and eyes and nose about in a most grotesque manner, and found it impossible to say more. Presently Milly went on: "Aw wur tryin' ta save his name, and Aw've lost mi own—an' wur." The remark was incomprehensible to her companion, and she began to rub her hands in her hair impatiently. That Milly should have any trouble that could for a moment compete with the possible loss of a sweetheart was to her unthinkable, and so she watched her friend with growing restlessness, tugged at her hair, wrinkled her face, and at last, with a dreadful scowl, she belied, out of pure sympathy, the deepest conviction of her mind by hinting, "Density happen mak's mistak's sumtoimes—loike other folk." It was a great effort, and Tet would have taken it back the moment it was out; but Milly did not seem even to hear, and when she spoke it was on another and vastly less important aspect of the case, in Tet's judgment.

"Does Jesse believe it, dust think?"

Resentment at unappreciated sacrifice surged in Tet's soul. Why was the stupid creature harping on that? But she was watching as she thought, and certain disconcerting emotions within her made her face more repulsive than ever. Then she took a plunge; her friend needed comfort, and must have it, at whatever sacrifice.

"Milly, he doesna believe a word on it, nor t'others noather."

The effect of her simple words amazed her. Milly sprang at her fiercely, a new wild gleam in her eyes, and her mouth awork with struggling eagerness. "T'others? Wot t'others? Is ther' onybody? is ther' a single soul i' Slagdin as believes in me? O Tet! Tet! dunna lie to me!"

Tet thought with a pang about her hinted perjury concerning destiny, but here was a stranded soul, and her heart was too much for her fancies, and so she cried indignantly, "Ger aat wi' thi, Milly! They aw believe in thi—aw as matters owt."

"Does Seth Pollit?"

"Ay!"

"An' Saul?"

"Ay; an' Pee Jump an' Billy."

Tet boggled a little at the last names, but she could not discriminate when Milly was drinking in her words as though they were honey, and so they came forth with perhaps unnecessary emphasis. She had scarcely got the words out of

her mouth, however, when there was a rush, she was seized by the arms and pinned against the doorposts so that she could not stir, whilst Milly, staring wildly into her face, cried, "Tha'rt lyin', Tet! tha'rt lyin'! Oh, fur God's sake, dunna desave me!"

Scared, indignant, and full suddenly of a terrible suspicion, Tet wriggled and twisted and gasped out, "Dunna, wench; it's God's trewth, it is! it is!" But Milly was not satisfied; she still held her arms, and cried, through blazing eyes and white, quivering lips, "Say it ageean. Does Seth?"

"Ay!"

"An' Jesse?"

"Ay, Jesse! Whey, woman, didn't he feight fur thi?"

There was a pause; the fingers nipping Tet's arm so tightly relaxed, the anguish faded slowly out of Milly's eyes; there was a flush, a gasp, and a burst of tears; and as she fell on her knees, and dropped her head into the other's lap, she sobbed, "Forgive me! forgive me, O God! Thou'rt good, Thou'rt good, Thou'rt good!"

And then as Tet, in mute, instinctive sympathy, stroked the ruffled hair and the soft white neck, she went on: "Tak' it aw, Lord; tak' iverything; tak' Jesse; *but spare my fayther's name.*"

Passion like this was utterly beyond Tet, and she patted the thick coils of hair and toyed with the tiny white ears, muttering confused objur-

gations on "density," intermixed with cooing consolations.

The minutes went slowly by, the Sunday school had "loosed" and the voices of children could be heard in the fold. Milly's sobs had ceased, but she was still on her knees, and was softly whispering, with her face in the cripple's lap. Tet knew that her friend was at prayer.

After several long minutes, in which Tet held herself still with a fine instinctive reverence, Milly raised her head, looked with steady, sorrowful eyes into the rugged, darkened face above her, and then, with a sudden yearning impulse, she threw her arms round her friend's neck, and Tet thrilled through and through with a deep wondering delight, which was the beginning of deathless affection, for her cheek was burning with the imprint of the first woman's kiss she had ever known.

Milly was calm now, almost serene. Tet looked at her with a new interest. She was thinner, calmer, whiter, and her eyes were large and haunting, and it was borne in upon the hunchback's unaccountable mind with all the force of a discovery that Milly was beautiful. The increasing sounds of life in the village warned them both of household duties, and as Tet, who had not spoken for several moments, nodded a wordless farewell and was leaving, Milly called her back.

"Tetie, wilt try an' see Jesse fur me afoor neet?"

Tet started and frowned; it was contrary to

all her "destiny" principles thus to go into the lover's way, but she was under some strange new spell, and so she nodded shortly.

"Tell him Aw want ta speik to him i' th' gardin to-neet."

"To-neet?"

"Ay; Aw mun dew it while Aw con."

"Mun Aw tell him sacrit loike?"

"Any way, soa as tha tells him."

"Afoor his folk, an' that?"

"Ay, if tha loikes."

Tet's face was one great note of exclamation. There was no room in her brain for further amazement, and so, with a puzzled sigh, she nodded in a docile way quite new to her, and vanished round the house corner.

But Saul Swindells had to wait for his tea that night. His housekeeper had more important business on hand, and business that was much more to her mind; it reminded her of things in the tale-books.

Half an hour later Jesse Bentley went down the back garden for the usual supply of Sunday "sallit," his mind occupied with recent occurrences. He had stooped down to gather the greens, with his thoughts wandering off and his face grave.

"Jesse!"

He sprang at a bound across the bed, and, wheeling round, gazed everywhere in vain search for the speaker.

"Aw'm here, lumpyed. Wot art gawpin' at?"

"Whe—whe—well, Aw be bothert—Tet!"

The hunchback lay on her stomach in the hedge bottom, her shoulders between two rough stems, and her black head protruding out of the hawthorn.

"Dunna ston' wackerin' theer, as if Aw wur a boggart! Cum here; Aw want thi."

When he had drawn near enough, she nodded her head as well as her inelegant and uncomfortable position would allow, and said, "Cum on, mon! tha'rt ta slow ta goo tew a funeral. Dust know as hoo wants thi?"

"Whoa wants me?"

"Whoa? Well, no' me, Aw con tell thi. Aw wodna ha' thi thrut efter me, an' noan sich loike."

"Whoa wants me?"

"Milly! tha'rt to goo daan th' gardin to-neet. An' see as tha behaves thisel'."

Jesse could scarcely believe his ears. "Tha'rt no' kiddin' me, Tet?"

"Thee goo an' see; hoo sent me hersel'. Aw'd ha' seen thi at Jericho afoor Aw'd ha' sent fur thi."

"Is hoo aw reet?"

"Hoo wod be but for meytherin' wi' chaps—an', Jesse?"

"Well?"

"Hoo's ta good fur thee."

"Dust think sa?"

"Neaw, Aw dunna think sa; Aw know—an', Jesse?"

"Wot?"

"If tha doesn't talk noice tew her, Aw'll scratch thi een aat."

CHAPTER XVII

"DID I LOVE HONOUR LESS"

WHEN the black head and scowling, impish face of the schoolmaster's foster-daughter were withdrawn through the hedge, and Jesse was left to himself, he stood there with his chin on his chest, in dull, wondering perplexity. For days he had been struggling with all sorts of strange and contradictory moods, and the message so oddly delivered to him did not improve matters. That Milly was guilty of the things imputed to her he did not for a moment believe, but that there was something in her conduct much more than mere whimsicality seemed as clear as anything could be. The injustice done her—for such he was convinced it was—roused a resentment deeper than any mere sympathy or sense of common fairness could have awakened, but that she had been just either to herself or him he could not admit. It was hard to seem to desert her in her hour of need, but she had so peremptorily dismissed him on the night of the stang riding, and was, according to report, so distant and "brazzened" about it, that he could not tell how he could possibly render her any

assistance. He had told himself again and again during the last few days that he would stand by her at whatever cost, and sink or swim with her fortunes; but the next moment he had found himself remembering that, if he braved his family and defied public opinion, he had no sort of assurance that it would make any difference as far as Milly was concerned, or that he would be any nearer winning her. If she would give him the slightest gleam of hope he could laugh at other things, but she was so incomprehensible and so inconsistent even with herself that he had not a single substantial encouragement to cling to. He loved peace and quietness, and was almost proud to be regarded as under petticoat government; but that, whilst he felt it would not have influenced him for a moment if he had had any hope of Milly, greatly confused the issue, and created uneasy, paralysing indecision. But this was anything but a heroic position to occupy, and the realisation of the fact annoyed and humbled him. He was angry and ashamed of himself for his hesitation, but the difficulties presenting themselves whichever way he turned were considerable, and he certainly was not prepared to be fooled by Milly and ridiculed by the neighbours without any compensating advantage. Sometimes he realised where his easy, unresisting manner was leading him with regard to Emma Cunliffe, and that deepened his feeling of cowardice; but, on the other hand, his engagement to her would be such a great delight

to his mother and sisters, and—he could not help seeing—to Emma herself, that it appealed strongly to his easy, kindly disposition. He had a strong man's indolent, non-resisting temper where women were concerned, was intensely though quietly devoted to his mother, loved above all things to please her, and hated domestic squabbling; and, had there been no Milly in the way, he might have allowed himself, as many another strong man has amazed his friends by doing, to be married by them, as the easiest and most comfortable policy for the moment. But Milly's summons awakened feelings he had been trying with faint success to suppress, and hesitation and reasoning ceased with him. He did not ask himself what she wanted—she did want, and that was more than sufficient; and he was absent and almost rude to his womenfolk, Emma included, without showing the slightest consciousness of it, or being in the least penitent when it was pointed out to him by Maria. Emma seemed pensive and suddenly shy, Maria was tactful and managing, but he treated them all with heedless indifference, announced he was not going to chapel without a pang, and went back into the garden to pace about and chafe at the leaden-footed moments until the arrival of the time suggested by Tet.

The service at the chapel had barely commenced when he raised his head over the top of the wall at the bottom of the Mangle House garden, and bobbed down again with a sup-

pressed little cry. Milly was yonder, seated at the back door, and dressed in a light grey dress he had never seen her wear before. It was the dress she had obtained for use in her little ventures of public singing. She had not observed his action, but sat looking thoughtfully down at her hands as they lay in her lap.

He called himself a coward and a "ninny-hommer," but he could not help himself, and so he raised his head cautiously to the level of the coping of the wall and took another and longer look. She had turned her head to listen for any sign that her patient needed her, and so he had a good view of her face. He heaved a great, long, wondering sigh, like that of a miser at a heap of gold not his own.

He had not seen her for days, but that was not sufficient to account for his surprise. What was it? This was another Milly—fairer, purer somehow, with a new indefinable dignity about her!—thinner, paler; but what had come to her eyes? They were larger, deeper, and, yes, less restless and changeable. All Jesse's soul went out to her; this was the spiritual transfiguration of suffering he had heard the preachers hint at now and then. Oh, if it should be that they had all misjudged her, that behind that vivacious, saucy face, and arch, mocking manner there was a really sensitive and refined spirit, what a martyrdom her life must be, and what a brutal cruelty the stang riding was! That cowardly David Brooks should pay for this if——

But Milly's father gave no sign of needing anything, and so, as she moved her head round towards him, Jesse had to duck, only instead of doing so he inadvertently raised himself, and she saw and beckoned to him.

She did not move as he approached, or even raise her head, but when he got near he observed—he could scarcely believe his own happiness—an empty chair waiting for him at her side. She smiled faintly, and motioned to him to be seated. For lack of something to say, he remarked about the weather as he dropped down beside her; but she did not reply. He stole a quick glance at her, and a sudden fear, a sense as of impending calamity, fell upon him. His second look was a hungry, regretful search for some sign of the old Milly in that changed and chastened face.

"Jesse, tha's bin a good friend ta me."

He was surprised, and not exactly comforted; but as her meaning sank slowly into his mind, a sense of unutterable meanness and self-loathing came over him, and he looked shyly again for some hint of the old Milly—she of the glinting eyes and mirthful but sarcastic lip. There was a pause, the leaves of the trees rustled softly, and through the branches came the distant hum of the chapel music.

"Aw want ta thank thi fur—fur stonnin' up fur me that neet."

There was something in her tones that terrified him, a ring of parting—of finality, and with a

sudden impetuous impulse he cried, with protesting, indignant face, "It's nowt! it's nowt! Aw *wod* ston' up for thi if tha'd gi' me th' chonce."

"Tha *wod*, lad!"

Why, great booby that he was, he was actually crying, and he grinned savagely to keep back the silly tears.

"Dunna, woman! dunna! Sauce me, caw me, clowt me, and Aw'll thank thi for't." She was very still, and scarcely seemed to hear him, but when she spoke she drove what little capacity for amazement was left clean away.

"Dunna mak' anuther mistak', lad. Be sewer tha luvs Emma afoor tha weds her."

"Aw dunna! Aw winna! It's thee Aw want, but tha winna have me."

She turned to look at him calmly, easily, but with a strange, unmanning wistfulness that froze his heart.

"Ther's noabry i' Slagdin fit fur thee bud her; hoo's good. Goody threw and threw is Emma."

"Huish, woman! huish! Dust want me ta curse her? It's thee, Aw tell thi. O Milly! Milly! wot's cum o'er thi, wench?"

"Mi nowty, wicked hert hates her, bud Aw know, Aw know hoo's good, Jesse."

For a moment it came over him that this was another of her tricks; she had always been wildest and most skittish when you expected her to be most troubled. Was she playing a part? He eyed her with dull suspicion, and as she

turned her head and caught his look a smile—cutting, terrible, heart-breaking—curled about her cold white lips.

"Ay, tha'rt capt, lad! Aw'm capt at mysel'!"

"Milly, wot is it? Wot's up wi' thi? Tha'rt killin' me, woman; tha'rt breikin my hert!"

There was a rush of red to her face—a momentary struggle within—and then, rising and stepping before him, she cried, with blazing eyes and swelling neck, "Emma? Emma? Hoo canna loike thi as mitch wi' aw her body an' sowl as Aw loike thi wi' my little finger."

He sprang at her with a cry, caught her in his arms, strained her to his breast, and rained down on her hot, unresisting face a shower of passionate, tear-mingled kisses. She did not struggle or resist, she seemed for a moment as eager as he; but when he dropped back into his chair, still holding her, he noticed that her face was changing to ashen grey; the new strange look he had seen in her for the first time that day was returning, and even whilst he was calling her by every tender name he could think of, she had slid from his arms, and was standing there and bending over him, like some anxious, mothering guardian angel.

"Aw'm glad of it, lad," she said, putting her hands to her rumpled hair, and evidently alluding to what had just passed between them. "Aw'm glad of it; it 'ull help me as lung as Aw live."

He sprang up towards her again. She did not speak, she did not move, but the quiet com-

pelling dignity with which she looked at him overcame him, and he sank back into his seat with new, and this time resentful amazement.

"An' neaw we mun part, lad."

He rose in indignant protest, but she quelled him with a look. "Goo thi ways, lad, an' may God in heaven bless thi!——an' her."

He dropped his head into his hands and his elbows upon his knees; then, after a few moments of silence, he rose to his feet, and with a stern, solemn face he said, "Milly, God do so to me and more also if ought but death part thee and me."

She swayed to and fro with a fresh spasm of emotion, but moved back slowly from him, and raised her eyes until they met his once more.

"Ther's sum things wur nor death, Jesse; ther's disgrace."

"Wot dew Aw care? Aw loike it! Aw glory in it! Aw'd raythor have it wi' thee nor be baat it."

She still drew away with almost imperceptible backward movement, lifting a long labouring breath as she did so, but never taking her eyes from him. "Jesse, Aw'm a silly wench, an' Aw've hed a silly wench's dreeams o' weddin'. Aw've dreeamed o' bein' a mon's pride an' glory an' queen, o' makin' him happy an' rich an' proud."

"Tha will, wench! Aw'st be th' prewdest——"

"An' sin' Aw cum ta — ta loike thi, Aw dreeams ten times mooar. O Jesse! mi lad, mi lad! Aw loike thi too weel ta disgrace thi."

For half an hour longer they struggled, he pleading, protesting, defying, she humble, patient, but marvellously strong and firm, and when at last they separated, without either kiss or word of parting, he went away to wrestle and brood, and pray as he had never prayed, in the fields, and she to sit at the side of her father's bed, with swimming eyes and bleeding heart—and sing.

. . . . . .

Jesse's walk in the fields was a very long and troubled one, but he went home in the young moonlight with a cleared mind and a very decided purpose. In the interview just closed it had been made as manifest to him as anything could well be that Milly had been sincere.

The utterly surprising frankness with which she had avowed her love to him was so contrary to her usual coy reticence and the native shyness on all matters of deepest interest, so characteristic of all true Lancashire folk, that he might under some circumstances have suspected it, but there was simply no room at all for such an idea. Neither could he entertain any longer the suggestions about her character which had been so rife in the village for some time. He had no illusions about her decision; there was apparently no hope for him at all. Milly was lost to him, and unless something happened which he could not anticipate at all, they must remain apart. At the same time, he was conscious of a marked change in his manner of thinking of her. She was farther off, certainly—apparently unattainable

—but uplifted, idealised, transfigured, a sweet and holy thing to be thought of with reverence. That he should ever have regarded her as merely an interesting variety of the ordinary Lancashire village girl seemed now incredible. That she might never be his appeared to matter very little by the side of the fact that he had become hers. For better or for worse, through ill report and good, through all life and for evermore, he was hers. It was no new and sudden passion, no blind idolatry or enthralment, but a sort of reverent worship.

For the first time he realised that his manhood was awake. Mother, sisters, village opinion, counted for nothing. Milly and Milly's interests became the one exclusive business of life. He would not have been an Englishman if he had not found reasons for self-reproach in his meditations, and before he had been thinking long he had arrived at the disconcerting conclusion that this disappointment and trouble were directly connected with his refusal to preach, and were Providential chastenings for the grievous sin of disobeying the call of God. This humbled him, and strengthened his desire to make atonement by devoting himself entirely to Milly's interests. He needed no incitement to this, but, as soon as he arrived at this point, the question arose what to do and how to do it. And here he was soon in deep water. That there was some mystery in Milly's life he could not any longer doubt, but how there could be such a thing he could not for a moment imagine. She had been born, like

himself, in Slagden, had lived all her life amongst its people, they knew every detail of her history, and her peculiarities had led them to discuss her oftener than most people; and yet the suggestions made about her were so obviously wide of the mark, that he could not entertain any one of them for a moment. Besides, if he understood her at all, she would resent any prying, and the more cause there was for secrecy the more likely she would be to want to keep it to herself. The position was disheartening, but he held firmly to his purpose of openly espousing her cause and doing everything in his power to help her; and as for the future, well, he would not have been a man had he not entertained some hope at least that happier chances might arise. He would haunt that Mangle House like a shadow, and do every bit of the unpopular work of turning she would allow. Chaff? Well, in his present mood he would like nothing better than to be enduring something, and especially some injustice, for her sake. That night when he got home, in a manner and with a quiet, unmistakable decision altogether new to him, he made it clear to his women-folk that there must be no more manœuvring with Emma, and left it to Maria either to settle the matter herself, or stand out of the way, that he might set himself right with the butcher's pretty daughter.

When he went to bed, however, the various experiences of the day came back to him, and Milly's relations with the oboist gave him a very

bad half-hour. Then he began to go carefully over Milly's history and the various incidents he could recollect in her very commonplace history—their life at the farm, Mrs. Scholes's death, the sudden and unexpected selling up of the stock and implements, and the retirement of father and schoolgirl daughter to the Mangle House. The stock must have fetched several hundreds of pounds, and unless they were in debt, which was against all he had ever known of them, the money thus realised, together with their income from the mangle and herb shop, should have kept them in more than comfort. And yet they seemed poor! Even now that her father was helpless, Milly made no effort to get assistance, and was working harder than ever. Well, after all, the village verdict that miserliness was at the bottom of it all seemed the only reasonable one, but that it harmonised either with what he knew of Milly or the character and spirit of old Nat he could not for a moment admit. There could be no secret leakage of their resources; they had no poor relations—no relations at all, in fact, except very distant ones in another part of the county. Milly was an only child—— But here came a pause, a frown, and he suddenly sat up in bed with an exclamation of amazement, a long-forgotten face slowly developed itself before his mind, and he cried, with a little gasp of bewilderment, "Wot on earth's cum of *him*?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SUPER'S DILEMMA

THE Superintendent of the Aldershaw Circuit was in a quandary. "The Slagden Scandal Case," as he was beginning to call it, seemed likely to give him considerable trouble, for he could not get anybody of any account in the Circuit to take it seriously. A strict, conscientious man, and something of a martinet, he could not bear irregularities, and the undisguised contempt for law and order which he seemed to see in the ecclesiastical procedure of Slagden had fretted his righteous soul, whilst the easy indulgence with which the most influential people about him listened to and laughed at the odd stories which were circulated in the Circuit about the village stirred his bile. The Circuit, he was convinced, was not a little responsible for the very unsatisfactory condition of things which he lamented so much; for it made a pet of the place, and could not be induced to take it seriously. Nobody pretended to understand the financial arrangements of the Slagden Society, and when he hinted that they seemed to him to be sus-

piciously like the process known as "robbing Peter to pay Paul," they did not seem to be surprised, and certainly not much concerned. "It's only Slagden," or "Poor old Slagden," or "That's Slagden to a T," was all he could get by way of comment; and when he had tried his first fall with the Society, and succeeded, they did not seem anything like as grateful as they ought to have been, and seemed astonished that he should think it necessary to take such trouble. The fact was, he was one of those careful, law-loving, but somewhat limited souls, who pride themselves on being diplomatic. The case now in hand, however, was beset with more than common difficulty, and if only he could have got his officials to see the importance of putting things on a regular basis, he would have gone into the matter with confidence and hope. But the thing was complicated. He had not been in the Circuit long before he discovered that old Nat Scholes, Milly's father, held a very high and secure place in public esteem. He seemed to be better known in the Circuit than he was in his own village, as is often the case with popular lay preachers. The rank and file of the members, from one end of the Aldershaw valley to the other, spoke of the old man in glowing terms, and the Methodist dignitaries held him in the highest esteem. Of his daughter, people seemed to know next to nothing, many of them never having heard of her existence, and one or two insisting that it was a son Nat had, and not a daughter.

The case, therefore, was beset with difficulties, and the fact—first communicated to him at the time he received his information about the stang riding—that old Scholes had been smitten down with a paralytic seizure did not help matters, for it seemed to indicate that the veteran local preacher was taking his daughter's disgrace very hardly. Such a scandal would have to be dealt with, of course, but it seemed cruel to have to do it whilst the old gentleman was suffering. The Super had expected to get something to guide him when he came in his colleague's place to preach, and at the Brookses', where he always went for tea, he certainly heard more than enough to justify his serious conclusions. But the action of the Slagden officials, as detailed in a previous chapter, disconcerted him altogether, and prepared him for obstruction, if not defiance. He had his duty to perform, however, and the honour of the Church to protect; some action must be taken at once, but when he asked himself where he ought to commence and how he ought to proceed, the answer was not forthcoming. Old Scholes was ill, however, and must be attended to, and in discharging that duty he might get some information, or at least an opportunity of personally studying the cause of all this unpleasantness. Two anonymous letters received by Monday morning's post, and each containing strongly worded animadversions upon Milly and pointed hints that official favouritism was suspected and would be exposed, constrained him

to immediate action, and about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, on the day after Milly's interview with Jesse in the garden, he presented himself at the Mangle House door.

He had resolved, as he walked up from the Pye Green station, to be perfectly impartial, as became his position; but a girl who had smirched her father's honoured name, given him a shock that disabled him for life, and brought scandal on the Church, was not the sort of creature to receive any weak-kneed encouragement from him.

"Could I see Mr. Scholes?" he asked, as Milly opened the door. He would ordinarily have added "Miss," but he could not be too civil until he knew more. Besides, this self-possessed young person had no trace of discomposure or shame about her; she seemed pleased rather than otherwise to see him.

"Will you come in, sir?" Milly was advanced enough to use ordinary English with such important persons as superintendent ministers. "You've had a long walk, sir. Will you take a pot of dandelion beer?"

She was drawing the liquor as she spoke—perhaps she was of the wily sort. Yes, he had heard, now he thought of it, what a wonderful tongue she had; but he was not to be caught that way.

"No, thank you. I want to see your father."

With true Lancashire hospitality, she ignored his refusal, and placed the foaming pot, flanked by a small plate of oatcake, at his elbow. It

was very warm weather, and the froth-topped pot looked exceedingly tempting to a man who had climbed a two-mile hill; but he could not compromise himself, so he turned his head away and asked curtly, "Is your father well enough to be seen?"

Milly hesitated, and seemed to be debating the point. "I think so, sir, as you have kindly come so far. But may I ask a favour?"

The minister looked at her sharply and drew himself up a little. "What is it?"

"He is not in a fit state to discuss a—a—painful matters."

"I'm sorry he has these painful matters, but he needs my sympathy all the more, and——"

"I had rather you wouldn't, sir, if you please."

"I had rather there had been no cause, my girl. Where shall I find him?" and he rose to his feet with a stern face. She moved into his way, but without speaking, whilst a dull blush began to mount to her cheeks.

"I suppose you mean the—the stang riding, sir?"

"I do; I'm sorry for your father, sorry in my heart."

He did not see that she was choking, and that her finger-nails were being driven deep into the palms of her hands. "You cannot see him, sir, unless you promise not to mention—that."

He looked at her hard enough now; she was certainly no ordinary girl, and he could easily believe some of the singular things he had heard

about her. Her manner was respectfulness itself, but there was not the slightest doubt that she meant what she said. He was trying to look her down, but he might as well have stared at a statue.

"Very well; let me see him."

Being Monday morning, the mangle had not yet commenced its weekly labours, but Milly, having ushered him into the sickroom, left him.

The furniture was somewhat scanty, and looked as though it had belonged to a much bigger house. Everything was spotlessly clean, and the invalid looked so neat and well-cared-for that he had difficulty in convincing himself that his visit had not been expected. Good or bad, the girl was a most assiduous nurse. But then, after what she had done, she had need. The Super was an exceptionally good sick visitor, and Nat looked so comfortable, cheerful, and even saintly, that he stayed longer than he intended, and returned to Milly in a very perplexed and undecided condition.

Nat had only alluded to his daughter once during the interview, but there was such perfect trust, such proud, grateful love in the reference, that the minister concluded that he did not know about the disgrace that had come. And yet, was not this the very cause of his breakdown? Really, it was very perplexing. Milly was ready with another offer of refreshment when he returned to her, and this time it was a dainty little glass of some home-made wine. He hesitated for a moment;

perhaps if he sat down and drank it, and chatted a little, she would talk, as all women did, and he would get some inkling to all this mystery. He took the proffered glass, therefore, with a short "Thank you," and subsided into a seat.

"What do you think of father, sir?"

"Very ill, *very* ill! It must have been a great blow."

Milly closed her eyes for a moment, and then asked, "But he will get better?"

"I hope so, I hope so; but in these cases the physical trouble is often the least serious of the complications."

She sighed. Would it be wise to speak a word to her for her good? Whilst he was debating the question, she asked, "Might I ask another favour from you, sir?"

He was on his guard again in an instant. "What is it?"

She stood away from the table against which she had been leaning, and revealed a pile of substantially bound books. "These are preachers' books. Could you tell me where I could sell them?"

He stepped towards the table and glanced at them—a good set of "Matthew Henry" complete. "These are your father's books?"

"Yes, sir, but he'll never need them again."

There was that husky, choking sound in her voice again, and this time he noticed it, but mistook the cause.

"Does he know you are selling them?"

"No, sir."

He had begun to thaw at these mute signs of poverty, but his suspicions all came rushing back. "But if your father is the man I take him for, these volumes will be precious to him."

"They are, sir." Her head had dropped. Ah! she was afraid to look him in the face.

"And will you take advantage of his helplessness to sell the things he loves?"

Her head was still hanging down. He was glad he had stayed now; he was getting at her. There was a struggle going on within her; his words had gone home. Suddenly she raised herself, stood there before him, not a convicted sinner, but an angry, outraged queen. Her bosom heaved, her lips went white, and her eyes were red and gemmed with starry tears.

"Sir, you are my minister, a man of God. I must tell you now what I have never told to mortal man. I sell his books to save his life, to get him a crust of bread."

The Super stared stupidly. This was not acting; this was no loose, giddy, frivolous girl! If there was wickedness here, it was of no common sort. Was he standing, as ministers so often have to do, on the edge of a terrible domestic tragedy?

"I'm very sorry," he murmured in a softer tone. "Perhaps I can sell the books."

"Never mind, sir. I can manage some other way;" and she threw an old cloth over the volumes.

"Yes, yes; I will. You need the money, and your father must not be pinched."

"The Lord will provide, sir. *He* knows."

The minister hesitated, feeling uncomfortable and somewhat ashamed. Perhaps there was some mistake. At any rate he could not leave matters where they were now, and so, after a long awkward pause, he said, "I'm sorry for this disg—er—a—trouble of yours—very sorry. Er—w—would you like to say anything to me about it?"

"N—o, no, sir."

"But I might be able to help you. I must do something in the matter, you know. I cannot leave it where it is."

No answer; she seemed to be thinking of something else. Presently, however, she replied, "Only do it quickly, sir—before my father gets about again."

"But, my dear young woman, it is more serious than you imagine; think of your soul!"

"Spare him, sir, and do what you like with me."

He was a little annoyed, partly with himself and partly with her. "But you do not see how serious it is. I would help you for your father's sake—if you would allow me."

She was looking at him sideways and very studiously; he felt an uncomfortable sense that the tables were being turned and that she was reckoning him up.

There was a little twitch in one corner of that

expressive-looking mouth. Surely the jade was not mocking him?

"There is one thing you can do for me, sir."

"What is that?"

"You can forget what I told you about our poverty—and let us alone."

His anger was rising, but he was a good man and tender withal, and so, by no means sure of his ground, he said, "No, no! you must let me assist you; I'll buy the books myself. Your secret is safe with me, but I wish you would confide in me about the other matter." He regretted that last sentence as soon as it was out. It might be interpreted as a condonation of her offence. As he spoke, however, he stepped towards the table and took up a volume. "I will take this with me and send for the rest; leave the price to me."

But there was a change in Milly. She was clasping her hands together, and her eyes were dilating wildly as she watched him taking the book. She had the manner of a cat watching the abstraction of its last kitten.

He tucked the bulky tome under his arm and took up his hat and stick. Milly's eyes followed him with that fearful, suspicious look with which a patient follows a dentist when he is collecting his instruments.

He was discussing with himself whether he ought to shake hands with her, and she was staring at the book he carried with hungry,

frightened eyes. He made a stiff bow. "Good morning, Miss Scholes. I will send the money."

But she had sprung at his arm, snatched the book from his grasp, and was hugging it passionately to her breast. "Aw winna! Aw winna! They're aw gone bud these. O God, forgive me! It 'ud breik his heart."

Standing there in sore amazement, the minister felt his eyes going wet. This woman confounded him. Good or bad, she was certainly very extraordinary. Had they who had given him the information upon which he was acting committed a blunder? Her last action, if he understood it, was exactly to his mind; a girl who felt thus towards her father was not quite lost.

"Yes, yes, miss; keep the books;" and he began to fumble in his pocket for his purse. She was watching him, the volume still hugged tight to her heart, and as he held out a sovereign in his hands their eyes met.

"God bless you, sir. We may have to come even to that, but not yet, sir;" and then, in a fit of confused stammering, she added, "You've been good to come here, and I'll ask you when I must."

He went away very sad, and more perplexed than he had been about anything for a very long time. A woman would do strange, mad things for love of a man, and this might be some unusually peculiar love affair; but if there was anything seriously wrong with Milly Scholes, all his experience and knowledge of human nature went for nothing.

Then he began to take in the wider aspects of the case. This perhaps accounted for the strange conduct of the officials when he summoned them last week. They would know all the facts of the case, and had lived in the village all their days. Perhaps he ought to have consulted them beforehand, perhaps he had better see some of them now. Seth's milk-farm was nearest, but he was not very well pleased with the Pollits, and he certainly did not want another interview with Mrs. Seth. Ah, there was the blacksmith's hammer! He would call upon Brother Jump. But then a sense of restraint fell upon him; he could not betray Milly, and he was conscious that this odd girl had obtained some sort of influence over him. He must be careful. But Peter, voluble enough as a rule, proved taciturn and most mysteriously suspicious. He would not follow his visitor's lead at all, but insisted upon discussing a chronic Slagden grievance about the paucity of ministerial appointments; and when the minister, craftily taking him unawares, plumped out the direct question as to whether there was any truth in the charges laid against Milly, he answered gruffly, "Ther' met be—an' ther' met not," and at once enveloped himself in noise and anvil sparks.

The cleric watched the formation of the horse-shoe with most flattering interest, and then went on to admit that there might be something in what he said about the Slagden proportion of appointments.

Suddenly, however, he asked, "Do you think, Brother Jump, that the Scholeses *are* poor?"

Away went Peter's hammer and tongs; he evidently took the question as a reflection upon Slagden, and was mightily indignant.

"Naa lewk here, Mestur Super. Arr yo' a sensuble felley, or arr yo' not?"

The Super, half amused, half astonished, hoped that he was.

"Well, then, does tew an' tew mak' fower?"

"I believe they do; but——"

"Howd on! lest have noa shufflin' wark abaat this 'ere;" and he limped up to his visitor, and, beating out his question on the palm of his hand, he demanded, "Can yo' tell me haa mitch yarbs cosses?"

"Herbs? Why, nothing, I suppose, except for gathering; but——"

"Well, then, wun wik with t'other they sell'n a paand a wik wo'th—wi' pumaytum. Is that poor?"

"No, no; but——"

"Han yo' iver bin i'th manglin' trade?"

"I? Oh dear no! I——"

"Well, then, yo' known nowt abaat it, dun yo'?"

"I fear not."

"Well, Aw dew. My Aunt Nancy Ellen made sixteen shillen a wik wi' that varry mangle, an' Milly mak's mooar."

The Super's face dropped; the matter got more perplexing at every step. But Peter, now at full trot, plunged along afresh.

"Naa, yo' Supers is rare hands at figgurin'?"

"So, so."

"So, so! Why, arna yo' caantin' c'lections aw day o'er—partly wot?"

"Well?"

"Well, haa mitch is three hundred an' seventeen paand three shillen, at foive per cent. per hannum?"

"Nearly sixteen pounds; but what has that to do with the question?"

"Ta dew? That's wot ther stock fotched when they left t' farm, an' it's makkin' interest yet. Aw seed owd Nat goo i'th bank th' varry day as he put it in, an' Aw've seen Milly cumin' aat mooar nor wunce."

The Super was walking in deeps that had no bottom. He stared at Peter, stared at the cow's-horn handle of the bellows, and lifted a long wondering sigh. Peter's evidence seemed conclusive enough, but it was impossible to think that Milly had been deceiving him.

The blacksmith was watching the effect of his arguments with growing satisfaction, and presently, leaning hard upon his stronger leg, he shook his head with a broad, appreciative grin, and cried, "Hay, he's an owd brid, Nat is!"

"You *must* be mistaken, Brother Jump. Look how poorly she dresses and how hard she has to work. They appear to me to be *very* poor."

Peter eyed the minister with the complacency of superior knowledge. "Ay, *yo'* thinkin' sa,

that's ther fawseniss. See yo', mestur,"—and he limped nearer, emphasised each word with a pat on the shoulder, and went on,—"Owd Nat 'll dee wo'th thaasands! Hay, he's a stockin' as long as mi arm sumwhere."

And the minister strolled back to Pye Green station more bewildered than ever.

CHAPTER XIX

A VISIT TO WISKIT HILL

THE milkman was meditating, or, to be exact, bassooning, and, to judge by the doleful and discordant mixture of sounds that came from his darling instrument, his dubitations were of a most melancholy character. He did not for one moment believe in the dishonour of Milly Scholes; it is probable that he would have stood up for her in face of the strongest evidence that could have been produced. At the same time, he did not attempt to conceal from himself that there was some awkward mystery about the Mangle House and its occupants, and this in spite of the fact that they had spent their lives in the village and lived openly amongst the natives. Of himself, he would have left the matter for time to unravel, but, unfortunately, others were not of his mind. He had heard that very day that the Super had visited the Mangle House during the forenoon, and the minister had not left Slagden half an hour when Seth heard all the details of the wonderful way in which Peter the blacksmith had "fair flummaxed" the

cleric. During the dinner-hour his wife had informed him that Maria Bentley had packed up her class-book to send to the minister, as an expression of her own and her members' sentiments on the local scandal, and Billy Whiffle, under pressure from the Brookses' faction, had taken a similar resolution with regard to his position as Society steward. Saul, for all his pragmatic obstinacy, would, he was sure, follow his lead and do what was possible for Milly. But they would be almost alone in the village, and to take a stand in opposition to the others would mean almost certain disruption amongst them. He found himself arguing more than once that Milly evidently cared very little what people thought, and that, therefore, it was ill-advised to split the Society for such a matter; but, to his own surprise, he found himself, these prudential considerations notwithstanding, stiffening into defiance of the popular clamour and to an uncompromising support of the ill-used girl.

"Naa, then, art ready? Wot wi' th' poipe, an' wot wi' that squawkin' machine, tha'll blow thi brains aat sum day."

The speaker was Saul Swindells, who wore his everyday trousers, his second-best coat, and his best Sunday top-hat, and carried a heavy-knobbed stick in his hand, evidently prepared for a journey.

"Sum folk hasna brains ta blow aat. Wheer't goin'?"

"Wheer thaa goin', tha meeans?"

"Well, wheer am Aw goin', then?"

"Tha'rt goin' ta Wiskit Hill, fur sewer."

Seth stared at his visitor with dull astonishment for a full half-minute, and then, as what Saul didn't say sank into his mind along with what he did say, he dropped his eyes and gazed thoughtfully at his bassoon. The very idea now suggested had occurred to himself more than once of late, and the fact that Saul had been moved in the same direction was a sort of Providential leading for him. To have agreed at once, however, would have been to violate all precedents, and so he continued his study of the bassoon, and presently replied, "Tha gets sum o'th fantastikist noations as iver coom intew a mortal's yed, thaa does: art goin' aw th' way ta Wiskit Hill ta ger a good puncin'?"

All the same, he began to put up his instrument.

"Aw'm goin' ta Wiskit Hill, an' tha'rt goin' ta tak' th' puncin', if ther' is ony."

"Ay, it doesna tak' mitch gumption ta bring trubble upa uther folk. Tha'rt th' copp'st hand Aw know at that sooart a wark."

But as he replied he put down the lid of the bin in which his precious instrument had been carefully stowed away, and commenced to button his coat. Without another word, Saul led the way into the road, and in a few moments they were marching through the breast-high wheat, the schoolmaster leading the way with hat tilted far behind his head and knob-stick

under his arm, and Seth, hands in pockets and head sunk between elevated shoulders, following after. For a little while they trudged along in moody silence, except that Seth grunted and groaned as though every step gave him pain. There were harvesters in a field near, and sharp reports every now and again told of grouse-shooters on the moor they were approaching. Apparently the cronies neither saw the one nor heard the other.

"This is a gradely foo's harrand, this is," grumbled Seth, as he mounted the moor stile.

"That's why Aw browt thee," was the snarling retort.

"Aw'll bet a boadle he'll no' be awhoam," was the next complaint; and to this the pedagogue scorned to reply.

"Wee'st lewk bonny beagles gooin' seven mile fur nowt."

"It's no' seven; it's six."

"It's seven, if it's a yard!"

"It's six!"

"Seven!"

"Six!"

"It tak's a schoo'mestur fur gradely thick-yeddedniss."

"The'r' nowt wheer milkmen cums."

A few minutes of grumpy jog-trotting across the heather, and then Seth pulled up.

"Wot art gooin' t' dew if he's nor awhoam?"

"Aw'm gooin' t' 'plough wi' his heifer,' loike th' Philistines."

Seth stared at his companion in pitying amazement.

"An' tha'rt gooin' seven moile ta ax a woman if her husban's gradely?"

Saul was momentarily staggered, and so, in his confusion, he fell back upon the old dispute.

"It's no' seven, Aw tell thi; it's six."

"Dust need t' walk seven moile of a swelterin' neet ta get thi yure poo'd? That's schoomestur sense daan to th' graand."

"Aw'm gooin' t' get to th' bottom o' this lumber, chuse wot tha says. Art cumin' on, or tha artna?"

For answer, Seth surveyed his friend from head to foot with calculating deliberateness, and then turned disgustedly round and stalked off homewards. Saul watched him with lofty scorn, and when he had travelled about thirty yards he called out, "Duffin' ageean! tha couldna face an owd sheep if it hed a petticoat on."

Seth stalked grimly on.

"Run, mon! Heigh thi! Th' boggarts is efther thi!"

Holding sternly on his course, Seth had now got a hundred yards off. Saul, forgetting his scorn in genuine alarm, put his hand to his mouth and bawled in tones tremulous with anxiety, "Aw'll goo bi misel'! Aw'll spile th' job, Aw will!"

Seth, moved perhaps by the implied surrender, wheeled suddenly round and marched stolidly back to his man, who was struggling hard to keep

the gleam of triumph out of his face. The milkman passed him by as though he had not existed, and so led the way in surly silence until they came in sight of their destination.

Seth had not spoken a word for over twenty minutes, but strode doggedly on, with his head projecting before him and his shoulders almost level with his ears. At the stile entering the village lane he switched round.

"Aw reacon tha'rt gooin' ta dew th' talkin'?"

"Aw'st pleease misel'."

"If tha pleeases thisel' tha goos bi thisel'."

Saul, to whom speech was a necessity of life, looked blank enough; but Seth had evidently made up his mind, for he proceeded, "Thee put thi motty in, an' th' job's dun ony minit."

"Tew yeds is better nor wun."

"Is tew brokken yeds better nor wun? Thee shut thi maath an' save thi noddle, moind that naa;" and, turning round, he led the way down the hill.

Saul must have been playing a part, for, as Seth proceeded, the schoolmaster made grimaces behind his back and winked to himself victoriously. Accosting the first person they met, the milkman ascertained that the oboist lived in a little white climber-covered cottage that stood end on to the road a little farther down, and so, glancing round with a warning look at Saul, he approached the house to reconnoitre, dropping as he did so into the lounging, easy manner of a strolling sight-seer.

The cottage was almost buried behind high

hedges, only there was a little gate at the corner. Seth, looking everywhere but straight before him, sauntered towards the gate, and then started back and tried vainly to reassume his suddenly dropped manner; for there, within five yards of him, sat a comely, round woman of about forty, who was knitting in the open doorway. He was too late to save himself, and so, to cover his retreat, he called out, as he glanced ostentatiously round, "Good evenin', missis! Wot place is this, naa?"

But Saul was a local preacher, and Mrs. Rawlings, the oboist's wife, recognised him at once. She also guessed that his companion was another Slagdenite, and suspected their errand, and so disconcerted the crafty Seth by replying, "Ger aat wi' yo'! Yo' known as this is Wiskit Hill as weel as Aw dew, an' Sam Rawlin's lives here, if yo' wanten him."

But Seth had recovered; his wooden face became as blank as a wall, and he appeared so absorbed in the floral decorations of the cottage that it seemed doubtful whether he had heard the last remark. He had sidled up alongside Saul, and was pointing out some particularly fine climbing roses at the house corner. "Them jockeys is th' Proide o' Preston, arna they, missis?" and his manner was intended to convey that he was simply a flower fancier out for a stroll.

"Aw dar' say they arr; bud conna yo' cum no furder?"

Thus invited, the two lounged in through the gate, still absorbed in floriculture.

"Aar Sam's nor in, if it's him yo' wanten, bud happen Aw'st dew?"

As she spoke she indicated a garden seat, and the two accepting clumsily the proffered accommodation, sat down, Seth still commenting to Saul on the fine condition of the roses.

Mrs. Rawlings watched them with amusement lurking in the corners of eyes and mouth, and presently she volunteered, "Aar Sam's no' cumin' a-playin' ta Slagdin no mooar."

To Seth's utter disgust, the irrepressible schoolmaster blurted out, "It 'ud ha' bin a foine seet bet-ter if he'd ne'er cum at aw."

It was no use. All the intricate and subtle scheme of cross-questioning which Seth had arranged as he came along must now go by the board; the stupid, plunging Saul had spoilt everything, and the discomfited milkman relieved himself by a prodigious groan.

"Ay, that's wot folk gets fur helpin' uther folk. Aw towd him haa it 'ud be."

Seth emitted another groan; and Saul, with dolorous shake of the head, replied, "Aw'm sorry fur yo', missis; Aw am, fur sewer."

"Sorry fur me? Wot fur?"

Saul's answer was another and longer groan, but Seth was perspiring with suppressed agitation. This woman evidently knew nothing about what had taken place at Slagden, and what a sorry thing it was to make her wretched!

"Well, ah——" Saul was commencing, when Seth drove his elbow into his side, and assuming

his most wooden expression, rose to his feet, and remarked, "Well, Aw think we'll be goin' a bit furer."

"Nay, nay! yo'n hed nowt yet! Sit yo' daan, an' Aw'll bring yo' sum drink;" and as she hastened to the scullery Seth shook his fist fiercely at his companion and whispered, "If tha speiks anuther wod Aw'll chuck th' job."

"Chuck it! Tha allis does when tha's mulled it. Tha shap's loike a flea in a glue-pot."

But their hostess was returning, and Saul became interested in the man-and-woman weather-box over the dresser, whilst Seth stared before him into vacancy with his blankest look.

"Yo'n cum abaat yond wench an' th' stang ridin', so aat wi' it;" and Mrs. Rawlings set pots of foaming treacle beer before them.

The cronies gave guilty little starts, and, sitting up, stole long significant glances at each other, and it would have been impossible to decide which of their faces looked most miserable.

"Ther's mooar foo's i' Slagdin nor i' aw Englanshire besoide."

Saul was firing up, but his companion checked him, and remarked conciliatorily, "Well, wench, we wur nobbut feart——"

"Feart? Ay, yo' wur feart of a quiet chap loike aar Sam runnin' off wi' a young wench,—Aw sh'd clog ageean if he did,—that's wot folk getten fur doin' a good turn."

"Good turn? It's a hill turn he's dun uz, Aw con tell thi, an' thee an' aw if—— Aw'st speik,

chuse wot tha says;" and Saul sprang away, and glared defiance at his friend.

"Ay, he walks six moile weet an' foine ta play fur yo', an' just 'cause he helps a poor wench ta mak' a liven, yo' pay him wi' lyin' an' backbitin'."

Seth was dazed—this thing was getting utterly beyond him; but he rose up, elbowed back the blustering schoolmaster, and, assuming command, replied, "Missis, we wur fain ta hev him fur a player reet enuff, bud a chap wi a noice, quiet-lewkin' woife loike yo' shouldna goo maulin' wi' young snickets o' wenches."

"Hey, wot a lung tail aar cat's getten! Yo' numyeds! Naa, sit yo' daan, an' Aw'll straighten it aat fur yo'. Why, mon, Aw did it misel'."

Dropping back wonderingly into their seats, the two cronies stared at her amazedly.

"Aw wur o'er at New Babylon Sarmons i'th spring,—aar Sam wur playin' theer,—an' a wench az wur shabby dressed coom an' set bi mi soide. Aw ne'er gawmed nowt abaat hur till th' singin' started, an', seeyo', Aw ne'er yerd nowt loike that wench's vice i' aw mi born days. Why, yo' bermyeds, ther' isn't a vice loike it i' Lankashire! Well, Aw yerd her aw th' efthernoon,—Aw couldna hearken to nowt else,—an' when we wur hevin' uz tay Aw towd aar Sam.

"Well, th' lumpyed furgeet aw abaat it, bud a toathre wik efter it wur aar Sarmons, an' Dan Stott coom fro' Slagdin ta help. Well, he geet thick wi' aar Sam, an' axed him t' cum a-playin' ta Slagdin; an' he did. Th' fost toime he wur

theer yo' hed a new chune az noabry knew. Well, aar Sam hed ta stop i' parts, an' when he wur restin' he yerd a vice i'th congrigation, an' at last he spotted it, an' then he rec'llected wot Aw'd towd him, an' hoo *wur* shabby drest, an' soa he says to hissel', he says, 'That's hur,' an' when they wur loosin' he went up an' spok' tew hur."

Saul was devouring every word, and Seth was shaking his head and groaning.

"Bud, my stars, worn't hoo huffy wi' him! He met ha' bin dirt bi th' way hoo lewked at him."

The cronies glanced at each other; that was just Milly Scholes.

"Bud aar Sam, az Aw towd yo', is fair crazy abaat singin', soa he up an' he says, 'Lewk here, young woman,' he says, 'ther's a fortin i' that vice o' thoine.' An' that browt her tew her cake an' milk, Aw con tell yo'! Hoo wur as fain as a sawft lad wi' a buttycake, an' talked as oily as th' insoide of a cart-wheel. Well, aar Sam fund aat az hoo knew mooar abaat music nor he did, an' he towd hur ta goo on, an' lent her sum pieces, an' then yore Sarmons cum raand, an' yo' known wot happened then."

Saul turned and glared at the milkman with a fierce "I-told-you-so" sort of look, and Seth, with a weary shake of his head, said, "Hay, wench! he'd ha' saved a seet o' bother if he'd oppened his maath."

"Hoo wodna let him; an' yo' ne'er axed him."

Saul began to feel that he was in a tight place, and knowing what to expect from Seth

for bringing him on such an errand, he wanted to find some scapegoat, and so he remarked, with overdone conviction, "That wench's proide 'ull ruin her sum day!"

"Uther folkses' lyin' tungues *hez* ruin't her, if Aw know owt," retorted the milkman sternly. As though to finish poor Saul off utterly, Mrs. Rawlings added, "Aar Sam says az that's just th' wun thing hoo's short on—consate."

In the terrible pause that followed Saul felt himself sinking lower and lower in his own and his companions' estimation, and so, with a desperate attempt at self-recovery, he cried, "We mun hev aw this writ daan upa papper."

Seth gave a sniff of ineffable scorn, and so, as an alternative suggestion, the suffering pedagogue went on, "Yore Sam mun cum to th' leeaders' meetin' an' give his affidavit."

"He'll dew that fast enuff; he's feart o' this lumber stoppin' her singin' jobs."

"Singin' or noa singin', hur charicter mun be cleart. If he winna cum, he'll ha' ta be subpeeneyed or habyus corpus't be Act o' Parlyment."

Saul thought this so fine a deliverance that he ventured to glance round, though a little fearfully, at his companion: this at least ought to conciliate him. Mrs. Rawlings also was watching the milkman's wooden countenance with curious interest. Seth rose deliberately, cleared his throat, glanced round the room, and then, buttoning his coat and preparing to make a departure,

he looked at their hostess and remarked, with withering scorn, "Missis, yo'n seen tew gradely Slagdin foo's ta-neet, an' *Aw* dunna know which on 'ems th' biggest;" and without a glance at his guilty-looking friend, he stalked down the garden path and up the hill towards the Slagden foot-path.

The walk home was pleasanter than might have been anticipated, for the sweet thought that Milly's character had been cleared of the most serious charge against her speedily overcame Seth's ill-humour, and so, long before they reached Slagden, they were talking as freely as ever. Saul, passing at a bound from dejection to triumphant confidence, was loud in his denunciation of the shortsightedness and prejudice of those who had so rashly concluded that Milly was guilty, and louder still in his condemnation of the jealousy and spitefulness of the Brookses, her chief detractors. Then he put together bit after bit of evidence to show that the action of David and his sympathisers was only part of a crafty scheme of which Seth's removal from office was a move; and finally he constructed an elaborate plan for the total discomfiture of the Super, and the Brookses, and all disturbers of the peace of the Church. They must lie low, keep what they had learnt to themselves, let the opposition mature their plans and make their investigations; and then at the supreme moment they would produce the oboist, and overwhelm the prosecution with confusion and shame.

Seth trudged at his companion's side with raised shoulders and blank face, responding only with mysterious grunts; but when at last the schoolmaster paused for breath, he wheeled round and demanded sternly—

"Will that put loife into her fayther's deead arm? Will it put brass into her pocket an' meyt into her stomach? That's wot Aw want to know."

Dashed by this unexpected damper, Saul stalked moodily on for some moments, and then, having become suddenly almost as doleful as his friend, he remarked, "Aar Tet says as hoo's gan Jesse Bentley th' bullit."

"He's gan it hur, mooar liker. Dust think a young chap loike him wants a wench as is th' talk o'th countryside?" and Seth, whose voice had given way, dashed an angry tear from his eye and plunged on again.

But the mercurial Saul was not to be depressed; they had made a great discovery and relieved their minds of a grave anxiety, and he was not going to allow Seth's pessimism to spoil his joy. Once more, therefore, he began to rejoice over their recent experiences, and was waxing warm and eloquent, when Seth wheeled round again and said, "Sithi! th' end, soide, an' middle of this lumber is this: they're poor. They'n twice as mitch a wik cumin' in as tha hez, and hoo's killin' hersel' an' gerrin' i' aw this lumber ta pay ther rooad. Naa if thaa con straighten that aat, tha'll dew sum good; bud tha's gettin' thi wark set, Aw con tell thi."

There, amid the rustling corn and the soft, changing moonlight, the two old stalwarts stood staring hard into each other's face. Not a word was spoken for several seconds. Then anxiety for the peace of the Church that was more than life to them, and sturdy resolution to vindicate an injured girl, moving mightily within them, Saul nodded to Seth, and Seth made a slow brooding signal in return. Two hands that never met in the way of ordinary intercourse silently gripped each other, and the solemn, wordless compact was made.

They parted presently, for Saul took a nearer cut home, and Seth plodded on by himself, his thoughts so entirely occupying his mind that he had reached the stile next to the "Dog and Gun," and nearly opposite the Mangle House, before he realised where he was. It was very still, but the fast moving clouds overhead played hide-and-seek with the moon and gave momentary periods of darkness. Just as he approached the stile the moon had one of its brief triumphs, and flooded everything with silver light. Seth pulled up with a gasp, stood staring before him like one stunned, and then, with an amazed glance around, as though calling all nature to behold this staggering phenomenon, he stepped back and groaned, whilst his heart beat almost into his ears, for there, in the Mangle House door, stood a tall young fellow, of towny dress, straining Milly Scholes to his heart, and covering her upturned face with passionate tears.

CHAPTER XX

AN IMPORTANT CONSULTATION

THE day after Seth and Saul's visit to Wiskit Hill was Noyton Wakes, and the mills at which the Slagdenites found employment were stopped. This, therefore, was Jesse Bentley's opportunity. He was a loom tackler, and since the Sunday night of his painful interview with Milly his occupation had compelled him to put in overtime in order to have the holiday free. During these three days the curious recollection that had come to him as he lay thinking in bed that sad Sabbath eve had been fermenting in his mind, and he had decided to employ his holiday in making careful inquiries and finding out what there was to know. A visit to Wiskit Hill was also in his programme, for though he had sat down twice to write to the oboist begging him to set their minds at rest, and clear Milly of the vile aspersion that had been cast upon her, he had concluded that the business was too delicate to be committed to writing and to the accidents of the post. Of one thing, however, he was resolved—whether he ever won Milly Scholes or not, he

would clear her name and set her in her true character before the villagers and the world. He did not say it to himself, but his resolution was undoubtedly strengthened by the hope that if she were vindicated, and could give herself to him with honour, he might succeed in winning her yet.

The first thing he wanted was information, and, if possible, he must obtain it without giving any indication of his purpose or awakening any suspicions. And so, as soon as breakfast was over, he strolled down to the gable-end, where the schoolmaster and one or two others were already assembled. Saul, hugging his wonderful discovery of the night before to himself, and revelling in the possession of so important a secret, came to the village rendezvous, painting to his vivacious mind the triumph and glory of the moment when he and Seth would divulge what they knew, and confound Milly's enemies. All the same, he had already dropped more than one mysterious hint when Jesse strolled up in his shirt sleeves, and but for a diversion which occurred presently there would very soon have been no tale left worth telling.

Just as young Bentley dropped into a seat a burst of singing came from within the Mangle House.

It was not a hymn or a Sunday-school melody, but a trilling, hilarious, triumphant snatch from an old and utterly earthly country song.

The occupants of the bench looked at each

other with raised eyebrows and incredulous stares, and as the singer rattled out the merry music, supported by the low rumbling of the mangle, Billy Whiffle shook his head, and, glowering scowlingly at the pear tree before him, remarked, "That wench 'ull sing in her grave, that's wot hoo'll dew!"

"Hinnycense con sing onywheer," replied Saul, with a significant glance at the speaker, of which he hastily repented.

"Hoo couldna sing 'o thatunce if hoo worn't hinnicent," cried Jesse stoutly.

"Them az lives th' lungest 'ull see th' mooast, that's aw az Aw've getten to say;" but the curiosity-challenging significance of Saul's first sentence faded away before he got to the end of the second, for Seth Pollit, with two small milk-cans in his hand, came out of the ginnel and up the fold. He was walking with his head down, and what of his face could be seen was unusually grave, even for him. He did not appear to notice that there was anybody at the gable-end, and was passing along towards home, when the song from the Mangle House burst forth again, more blithe and merry than ever. Seth dropped his cans with a startled look that deepened gradually into horror; he stared at the house-end, stared at his friends, moved a little and stared at the cans at his feet, and then stood listening to the music with a long, solemn face, upon which indignation and loathing seemed to be struggling for mastery.

The gable-end benchers had been astonished at the unusual frivolousness of the music from within, but the effect it was producing upon the notoriously imperturbable milkman was so remarkable that they were watching him with strained interest. The singing ceased. Seth stood for a moment or two still listening; then he heaved a prodigious sigh, picked up his cans, turned away as if to depart, and then, looking round at Saul and Jesse, he jerked his head in the direction of the farm, and marched stolidly off towards home. Thus peremptorily yet mysteriously summoned, the two speedily overtook him; but he plodded on with hanging head and miserable face, and gave not the slightest sign that he was aware of their presence. Leading the way down the yard, he opened the door of the shippon, and silently motioned them to be seated. Then he went away to get rid of his cans, returned almost instantly, closed the door quietly behind him, locked, and even bolted it, and then turning to Saul with such a face as the other had never seen him wear before, he demanded, "When did he dee?"

"Dee? Whoa?'

"Owd Nat; he's deead, isn't he?"

"Deead? Nor him! Dust think as hoo'd be pipin' aat loike yond an' him deead i' th' haase? He's gerrin' better, mon."

Seth, whose face was ashy pale, looked hard at his friend for a moment, and then stepping up to him, and touching his waistcoat to em-

phasise his words, he said, in thick, agitated voice, "Hoo's gooan off it! It's druvven her cracked!"

"Cracked?" cried the two amazedly.

"He's deed i'th neet, and hoo's gooan mad! Poor, poor wench!"

"Mad? It's thee as is mad; tha's bin wakesin' awready."

"Saul," and Seth's lips were white and his voice hollow, "hast iver seen a sperit?"

"Sperit? Neaw, nor thee noather. Wot's up wi' thi?"

"Ger aat, Seth! ther' is noa sperits," chimed in Jesse.

It was evident, however, that Seth was powerfully moved about something, and the two studied him with painful intensity.

"Wot does it meean when yo' see folks' sperits afoor the'r' deead?"

"It meeans a skinful o' whisky an'——"

But Saul, now as grimly earnest as the pale milkman, thrust Jesse aside, and rising to stand before his friend, he cried, as he fixed his eyes upon him, "It meeans deeath!"

Seth, without for an instant moving his eyes from the face of his old companion, lifted a long, anxious sigh, and replied despairingly, "Then he is deead! Aw seed his sperit las' neet."

Jesse burst into a hard, unbelieving laugh, but it was checked midway, for the others were looking into each other's eyes intently, and Seth's face suddenly assumed a puzzled, baffled sort of expression, and he cried, in helpless be-

wilderment, "But Aw ne'er yerd of a boggart az loiked clippin' afoor! He wur clippin' her an' clippin' her loike heigh-go-mad!"

"Whoa wur?" and Saul's face was sickly, and his eyes almost bulging out of his head.

"He wur! Nat! Aw seed it as sewer as Aw'm stonnin' i' this shippon."

Saul stepped back and surveyed his evidently scared and serious friend with stupid perplexity; then he turned and glanced appealingly at Jesse, and, just as the latter was about to speak, he wheeled round to Seth, and cried, with anger and disgust, "Tha seed anuther of her scow-bankin' felleys; that's wot tha seed."

Solemnly raising his hand above his head, Seth reiterated, "If ever Aw see owt i' this wo'ld——" but once more his face became one pucker of mystification. "But wod caps me, he didn't favvor th' owd chap az he is naa. It wur loike he wur when him an' me wur mates, an' yung!"

"W-o-t?" and with a great shout, and the light of a wonderful discovery in his face, Jesse Bentley unceremoniously thrust the schoolmaster aside, and standing before the agitated milkman, cried, "Howd on! Howd on! Thee answer me wun thing, an' Aw'll tell thi whoa tha's seen."

Saul growled to the excited young lover to "moind whoa tha'rt shuvin'," and Seth demanded to know, "Conna Aw believe mi own een?" but they were both eager enough to hear what elucidation Jesse had to offer.

"Naa, then, yo' known as they pertends ta be weel off, dunna yo'?"

"Well?"

"An' yo' known as bi th' brass they mayn they mus' be weel off, dunna yo'?"

Two tentative nods.

"An' yo' known, whether onybody else does or not, as the'r' as poor as church mices?"

"Well?"

"An' Milly's starvin' an' pooin' her hert eawt ta get mooar brass, isn't hoo?"

"Go on!"

"Yo're owder nor me: wur owd Nat a grabber afoor they went i'th Mangle House?"

Two decided shakes of the head.

"Then ther' mus' be a screw loose sum-wheer?"

"Well? Goo on, mon!"

"Well, naa, then! Wheer's their 'Siah?"

But the sensation Jesse evidently expected his question to produce did not manifest itself. There was something, in fact, very like an anti-climax for a moment, but after a series of scowls and frowns, in vain endeavour after recollection first and comprehension after, the two cronies looked at each other, and then at Jesse, and then at each other again, and at last Saul gasped out, in a voice of mingled amazement and conviction, "By gum, lad, tha's getten it!"

"Getten it? It's as plain as a poikestaff. It coom to me i' bed las' Sunday neet, an' Aw've bin maulin' wi' it iver sin'. But this sattles it."

Seth was by no means clear, however; so many staggering things coming one after the other confused his mind and clogged the machinery of his brain, and so he asked dazedly, "Haa dust meean—sattles it?"

"Well, owd Nat hed a son as they cawd 'Siah."

"Ay, bud Aw'd cleean furgetten it."

"Tha met weel; he's ne'er bin i' Slagdin az onybody knows on fur ten ye'r."

The two stood blinking their eyes rapidly, and labouring to comprehend, whilst Jesse went on—

"He wur sent away tew a boardin'-schoo' when he wur tor't eleven ye'r owd."

"Nowt good enuff i' Slagdin," growled Saul, with professional jealousy.

"An' he nobbut coom whoam a two-thri toimes, an' then he went a-clarkin' i' Manchester."

"Nowt good cums o' proide an' boardin'-schoo's," muttered Saul.

"That 'ull be eight ye'r sin', isn't it?"

"Well?"

"An' owd Nat wur allis talkin' abaat him an' braggin' wot a clivver chap he wur."

"Ay, at fost."

"At fost! Han yo' yerd oather him or her name his name this seven ye'r?"

"Hoo wur thinkin' ta mitch abaat uther chaps fur that," interjected the schoolmaster.

"Thinkin'? When prewd, up-lewkin' folk loike them hez a lad as they ne'er speiken abaat, wot does it meean?"

"Ay," and the two elders sighed and shook their heads heavily.

"Naa, Aw'm tellin' yo'! Yo' con talk as yo'n a moind, but when aw comes to aw, yo'll see as them tew's scrattin' an' scrapin' an' starvin' ther innards ta keep him a gentlemon."

Seth and Saul mused deeply for a while, and then Saul said, with curling lip, "He mus' be a snidey wastril! An' haa is it as he ne'er cums whoam?"

"Haa dun we know as he ne'er cums whoam? It wur him as Seth seed las' neet, or Aw'm a Dutchman! An' moind yo'," and Jesse went red with resentment and some tenderer feeling, "aw th' nasty tales as hez bin towd abaat her bein' seen wi' chaps i'th loan an' places cums that rooad. Cunfaand his brazzen face! Aw wuish Aw hed him here."

"If it wur him Aw seed, he's as straight loike his faythcr as wun pey's loike anuther," said Seth, still overcome with astonishment, and by no means clear on some of the many points at issue.

"He's no' loike her at ony rate," replied Jesse jealously.

It was some time before he could get the others to see things as he saw them. Seth had not yet entirely relinquished his notion about the apparition, and Saul was somewhat piqued to think that a young fellow so much their junior should have been the first to penetrate the mystery. Besides, at best it was only a

series of guesses, plausible though the young lover's earnestness made them look.

There was a lengthy silence, the two cronies meditating with their heads down, and Jesse watching them with uneasy eagerness. As neither of them seemed disposed to speak, he said at last, "Soa naa yo' know th' tale an' th' tale's mestur."

To his surprise and disappointment, Seth asked glumly, "Wot dun we know?" and Saul clinched the question by inquiring a little jealously, "Haa mitch better aar we, naa we dun know?"

"Better? Why, hoo's cleart, isn't hoo? If nobbut yond Wiskit Hill wastril——" But he was interrupted by a couple of exclamations, and his companions, glad to be able to match his revelations, gave him the details of their interview with the oboist's wife. Jesse's first reply was a most fervent "Thank God!" and then, quick to see the significance of the new facts, he cried, "Pawverty ageean, yo' seen! pawverty ageean!" and then turning fiercely upon Saul, he went on, "Dunna thee cum na mooar wi' thi foine sarmons abaat pawverty bein' a blessin' i' disguise; it's bin killin' hur an' ruinin' hur an' suckin' hur sowl away. Oh, hang that wastril of a brother! Aw wuish Aw hed him here."

Waiting until Jesse's outburst had spent itself, Saul repeated his question, "Wot better aar we fur knowin'—if we dun know? Wot difference will it mak'?"

"If it is as tha says, hoo'd be wur off tin iver if hoo know'd we jaloused it," added Seth.

Jesse made an impatient gesture, but as the question sank into his mind, his face fell, and he sighed broodingly.

"Hay, wot a mixed-up lumber it is!" he cried helplessly; and then, with petulant desperation, he went on, "But Aw'st feight it aat! Aw'st clear her name, an' show aw th' wo'ld as hoo's th' grandest wench as iver walked upa shoe-leather! Aw will, sa help me God!"

"Ay, lad, tha'rt reet, lad; an' ther's tew owd sawftyeds here as 'ull help thi. Bud tak' thi toime; mooar hurry less speed, tha knows."

There was unwonted kindness and sympathy in Seth's tone as he said this, and Jesse, who had got to the shippon door, was touched by it. He hesitated, staring hard into the open, with his back to them. Suddenly he turned round, and stepping up to his friends, but looking particularly at Seth, he asked huskily, "Dust think it's a judgment on me?"

"Wot fur?"

"Fur no' preichin'?"

"Nor it, mon; it 'ull aw cum reet, tha'll see."

Jesse, still struggling with some deep emotion, shook his head. "Yo' durn't know aw as Aw know;" and then, with a painful smile, he added, "By th, mon, Aw'm loike Paul wi' th' Jews. Aw could caant misel' cursed fur Milly;" and, averting his face, he moved quickly to the door and was gone. He did not go far, however, before his

reflections arrested him, and he took the first turn to the left into Grey Mare Lane, that he might collect his thoughts and decide upon some course of action.

It was a matter of profound thankfulness to him that Milly's intercourse with the oboist had been so satisfactorily explained, and he was quite in sympathy with Seth and Saul's idea of keeping the matter secret until the Brookses had brought things to a head and Milly had been publicly vindicated, though he did not conceal from himself that any hour some communication from the oboist might make their plan unnecessary. But if the Wiskit Hill man kept away, as was probable, unless applied to by the opposite party, or moved by some other motive, the defeated persecutors of Milly would only be the more chagrined and malignant, and there were other suspicious circumstances about the mangle girl upon which they might immediately fasten. A sense of disappointment crept over him as he turned these things over. What better was he, after all, for his grand discovery, even if it should prove that his surmises were correct? The policy of concealment so long pursued by the Scholeses would probably be continued; Milly knew as well as he did that people thought them well off, and took no pains to correct the impression, even though it had earned for them the unpalatable reputation of miserliness. It was plain, therefore, that she wanted them to think so, and what prospect was

there of this proceeding of hers coming to an end? The first thing, therefore, was to make sure of the facts, and find out all about Josiah Scholes. He couldn't be dead — they would have heard of that; but he had dropped out of recollection as effectually as though he had never lived, and this could not have been unless the Scholeses had wished it and connived at it. And the fact that they had done so made it clear that there must be something to conceal. If he began to make open inquiries, he might be simply springing a mine upon Milly, and probing into things she was sacrificing everything to hide. She was not taking all these pains, suffering as she suffered and struggling as she struggled, for a mere whim. And then, again, if there was nothing behind this secrecy of theirs, and they really were in deep poverty, she had the easiest way possible out of it, for she could marry any day she liked. David Brooks was very well off, according to Slagden standards, and he himself had good wages and better prospects, besides nearly two hundred pounds in hard cash in the bank. And they were not the only ones; he could name at least two others who would give their very ears for a smile from her. No! there was a secret and very serious drain upon the resources of the mangle people, one that was sapping Milly's strength and spoiling her womanhood, one that had driven her to shifts and tricks and glaring inconsistencies, until he himself was not sure he knew her real nature,

and one that had smirched her reputation on its most delicate point and bade fair to break her heart. She could have got rid of mere poverty any day by marrying, but there was something, evidently, that made marriage impossible. Ah! now he came to think of it, that explained the tantalising contradictoriness of her conduct towards him. She did like him: had she not under temporary impulse so given way as to show him marks of tender favour she had shown to no other? Her heart was his, but she could not—— But here he checked himself. That was not the reason she had given only as short a time ago as Sunday night! She had talked as though there was nothing in the way but the disgrace she had suffered, and that would soon be put right now. His heart began to riot within him: why, there was nothing in the way! He might now, according to the conditions she had laid down, resume his suit. The next moment, however, a rush of mad jealousy rose within him; if there was nothing in the way but the stang-riding incident, and the mangle people had no monetary or other difficulty, who was the stranger Milly had kissed in the moonlight only the very night before, unless Seth had been dreaming? He heaved a long, troubled sigh. No! Milly might be mysterious and incomprehensible, but the village verdict, that she was a heartless and unscrupulous flirt, no longer had any weight with him. His theory about a ne'er-do-weel brother seemed to meet the facts

better than anything else he could think of, and to be satisfied on that head seemed his first duty. At this point, however, the scene painted by Seth came back to him again: the milkman had depicted Milly as clinging round the neck of the stranger and kissing him with passionate eagerness. How could she do that if he were a "wastril"? Well, the thing was beyond him, only he must do something. This he would do: he would see Milly again—go and turn for her, in fact—he could contrive to hint to her that her vindication was certain and near, and then from her manner he would be able to judge what hope there was for himself. If she would give him the slightest encouragement, ten thousand times as many mysteries and difficulties about her should not deter him; and if she did not encourage him, he would be no farther off, but would know better how to proceed. With this resolution he turned round in the lane, and made straight for the Mangle House.

CHAPTER XXI

A NEW MILLY

NEVER in his life had Jesse Bentley been so utterly amazed as he was when he visited the Mangle House that day. Among the unwritten laws of the Slagden social code was one which had reference to the front door of the Scholeses. Being the entrance to a place of resort and business, it usually stood open winter and summer, and when it was closed the villagers understood that Milly and her father were at meals or that the mistress was "fettlin' up." When Jesse, therefore, emerged from the end of Grey Mare Lane and found the Mangle House door shut, he glanced at his watch, and discovered it was dinner-time, and so made home for his own food. Over the meal he received two pieces of information, both supplied by his elder sister, Maria. She did not communicate her information directly to him, for they were barely on speaking terms just then, but flung them snarlingly at her mother, who heard them with dropped eyes and fidgety, embarrassed manner. One was that Milly Scholes had at least three

engagements to sing at public functions in the near future, all presumably obtained by the influence of the oboist, and the other that Emma Cunliffe was ill and the doctor was attending her. Neither piece of news was encouraging, but the latter gave him serious concern, and sent him down the back garden, where he spent a very unhappy half-hour. That he had nothing really to blame himself for he was perfectly well aware, but the strict theological school in which he had been trained had taught him to be exceedingly suspicious of himself and of all arguments for personal exculpation. He had a very grave face and a heavy, accusing conscience, therefore, when about two o'clock he presented himself at Milly's residence. As he approached, he heard singing, and somehow it smote him with uneasy fears very much in harmony with his present depressed and apprehensive condition. It was as high, bright, and joyous as the strains he had heard earlier in the day, but so utterly out of harmony with what he knew of Milly's circumstances that it filled him with vague but deep uneasiness.

"'In darkest shades if Thou appear,
My dawning is be——'

Hay, Jesse! tha'rt just i' toime! Aw wur just wuishin' fur sum dacent yung felley ta gi' me a turn; my arms is welly droppin' off."

As he stood there in the inner doorway, in dull wonder and growing fear, she held the

handle of the mangle invitingly, as of old, and with her old seductive look, but when he took it she did not remove her hand, but allowed him to touch and even cover it with his own; and when at length she did draw it away, she brushed the lapel of his coat with a grateful little tap that was almost a caress, and then, whisking suddenly round, burst out again in tones high and wild, but blended here and there with curiously pathetic little notes—

> "Thou art my soul's bright morning star,
> And Thou my rising sun."

For the moment her back was toward him, but she sang eagerly, excitedly, and as she turned again to the light he saw that in her face which sent a chill to his soul. She was thinner and paler and more weary-looking than ever he had seen her; her eyes had those dark rings round about them which are so eloquent of suffering, and looked faded and dim, as though she had wept the very fountains dry. Her limbs, heavy and drooping, seemed to have a sort of unnatural, spasmodic activity in them, as though they were moved by galvanic wires, and her usually graceful movements were eccentric and angular. This was the result of his first glance, but the second revealed something else. Through the dim, dull eyes streamed floods of melting, glowing light, wondrous in itself, but through such mediums and in such a haggard face terrible to behold—at least to him.

He had read somewhere that the insane had a strange, unnatural glare in their eyes—the infallible sign of their unhappy condition; and it appeared to him that if ever he had seen such a light in human optics, he saw it now. Old Nat, up and dressed for the first time since his stroke, was sleeping, with the unnatural heaviness characteristic of his disorder, on one side of the fireplace, and Tet Swindells, with one leg tucked under her and the other swinging nervously over the chair-seat, was on the other side; but Jesse saw neither the one nor the other —he had eyes for nothing but the woman folding clothes so deftly within a couple of yards of him, and trilling like an inspired lark, whilst her eyes blazed like stars—

> "Thou art my soul's bright morning star,
> And Thou my rising——"

But here she broke off, to look eagerly through the window, and then burst out—

"Hay! isn't it a beautiful day? isn't it a luvly wo'ld? Isn't God good? Jesse, Jesse, isn't God good?"

Jesse, with sinking heart and disturbed, anxious look, said, "Ay."

"Ay?" and she was at his side in a moment, her eyes swimming with tears and her voice thick with suppressed excitement. "He is good! Good! good! Say it! say it, Jesse! God is good."

"God is good," repeated Jesse, wishing in his

soul that she would not look and speak like that.

"His mercy endureth for ever."

"His mercy endureth for ever."

"Sorrow may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning."

With distressed eyes and long, solemn face, he repeated, "Sorrow may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning."

"An' this is mornin'! this is mornin'!" went on the wild creature, looking at the scared mangler without heeding in the least his miserable expression.

"He brought me out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst my bands in sunder;" and then, making a little movement towards him, as though she were going to embrace him, she turned away, and burst out again—

> "Thou art my soul's bright morning star,
> And Thou my rising sun!"

"Milly, Milly! wotiver's up wi' thi?"

"Up? God's up, an' heaven's up, an' reet's up, an' Aw'm up! Hay, Jesse, lad, would't loike me ta preich thi a sarmon?"

"Aw'd loike thi ta sit daan an' quieten thisel'. Heighi!"

"Hoo's bin a that rooad aw mornin'," said Tet in a thick whisper, and nodding to the distressed young fellow with her most terrible scowl.

"Huish? me huish? Aw'll ne'er be quiet na

mooar as long as Aw'm wik. Aw've walked aat of a tunnil, Aw've cum aat of a coil-pit, Aw've risen aat of a grave. He took me out of a horrible pit and the miry clay. He did, He did, an' Aw'll niver be quiet na mooar!"

But even as she spoke some change began to appear; she went paler, if that were possible, and unaccountable tremors shook her body. In another moment she would have fallen, but as he sprang forward she suddenly recovered, a shower of hot tears burst from her eyes, and she sank quietly and with a new shyness into a seat.

They belonged to a class which is shy and clumsy in the ministry of tenderness, and so, whilst Tet put her bony arm round her friend's neck, and pressing cheek to cheek began to mutter cooing, soothing words, poor Jesse, in mute helplessness, was feeling stupid and miserable about his own lack of resourcefulness, and anxious and fearful about the distraught girl. Tet scowlingly motioned to him over Milly's shoulder to let her alone, and for the next few minutes he paced uncertainly about the floor, wondering what all these alarming signs might mean, and struggling with the most terrible apprehensions about his sweetheart's condition. Tet bade him open the back door for more air, and gathering from the energy and mysteriousness of her gesticulations that she wished him out of the way for a short time, he strolled out into the back garden. At the end of a quarter

of an hour Tet came to recall him, but shook her head and put her finger on her lip to impress upon him the necessity of silence. When he re-entered the room, however, Milly had resumed her place at the table and was filling the roller she had left unfinished; whilst old Nat, now awake, was sitting up, evidently unconscious that anything unusual had happened. For the next twenty minutes the mangle girl never opened her lips except to speak to her father, but her manner seemed to show that she was, outwardly at least, herself again. Helpless though he felt himself, Jesse's heart bled for the girl who had suffered so terribly, and the deeps of his strong, simple nature were stirred as he asked himself what this disturbing outburst might mean. As he brooded and absent-mindedly lugged away at the mangle handle, his eyes followed her about yearningly, and the love of his heart burnt hot within him. Presently, however, he perceived signs of another change. Her voice when she spoke to her father was steady and more natural, her manner became easier and less spasmodic, and her limbs had some of the old grace in their movements. Free enough with her words, Milly had always been distant even to haughtiness in the matter of personal familiarities, and was credited with much more than her due proportion of dislike for those outward manifestations of affection which make up so large a part of the mystic language of love. But now, though she did not speak, and care-

fully avoided meeting his eyes, she never came to the mangle without giving to him one or more of those apparently accidental little touches on hand, arm, or shoulder which mean so little to ordinary people and so much to those in love. Then she did a wonderful thing—for her. As the back door was still open, and there was a slight draught in the room, she picked his cap from the bench inside the door where he had thrown it, and stepping into the way of the mangle handle, so that he was compelled to stop, she drew his cap upon his head from the back forwards, with her own head slightly averted. For one short minute she held the peak in her hand, and raising her eyes to his, looked into them steadily without blink or blush, and then turned away with a soft, shy smile. For such another look Jesse would have given the dearest thing on earth. He had never known until that moment how much two grey eyes could say in a single instant of time. Wildness? What he would have called had he been familiar with the term—hysteria? There was nothing in these speaking orbs but love and trust and lowly triumph, and the passion she had bidden him smother only a day or two ago now flamed up within him, and he blushed like a shy schoolgirl. His heart began to beat until it pained him, and he ground away at that old mangle as though afraid that if he stopped the blissful dream might vanish. What a tongue-tied, cold-hearted clown he was! Any other man, though ten old

Nats had been present and ten scowling Tets, would have had her in his arms; but he simply clung to the handle of the old machine with a dull desperation, and did not dare even to look at her. When at length he did venture to raise his eyes, there was still another change in his inscrutable mistress. She was more herself than ever, more restful and collected, and she had taken to looking absently through the window, as she often did, he remembered. Then something of the old light of mischief began to gleam out of the corners of her eyes, and that curious teasing, downward droop he knew so well appeared once more in the angles of her mouth. By this time, however, his thoughts were harking back to the commencement of these astounding experiences; he could scarcely believe that it was only about an hour since he had been listening to the bitter sneers of his sister. What did it all mean? What unheard-of thing had happened? But he observed that Milly was watching him sideways and very dreely, and as his eyes met hers she turned away, and brought a start and a gasp from him, as she quietly remarked to Tet—

"Tet, dust know as Jesse is goin't be marrit?"

Three short, sharp cries of amazement from three persons, and then Jesse, with the blood rushing to his head, cried, "Milly! art mad?"

Her face was demure enough, but her eyes, which she tried to hide, were brimming with mischief, and though she ignored his question, she replied, in answer to Tet's ejaculation, "Wed!

Wed! Ay, wed! an' sewn tew! Aw'll back he's neer towd thi!"

"Towd me? Neaw!" gasped Tet.

"Neaw, an' he's ne'er towd me noather; but it is sa. Lewk at him colourin' theer an' hangin' his yed daan."

"For God's sake, woman, ha' mercy!" and Jesse, uncertain whether she was mad or madly cruel, let go the handle of the mangle and stood glaring at her with something of dread in his face.

"Whoa the ferrups is he weddin'?" cried Tet, scarcely less agitated than Jesse himself.

"Ax him thisel'; he's theer. Hoo's goin't be dressed i' whoite an' a lung fall on."

But Tet saw more from under that flickering left eyelid of hers than Jesse did, and so she asked with an eagerness not quite as genuine as her former manner, "Whoar is it? Emma?"

The question seemed unexpected, and evidently suggested a new idea; for Milly, still avoiding his perplexed and anxious face, did not answer directly, but said, "Hoo'll ax uz to th' weddin', if he winna. Hay, hoo'll lewk weel i' weddin' faldals, Emma will." But, though she kept up the same bantering tone, she spoke a little absently, as though her thoughts were wandering somewhat.

"Milly, art tha mad, or am Aw?"

Jesse was standing rooted to the spot, and no more able to move than to fly, and as she glanced round and noted the anguish in his face her look

changed; a soft, caressing light stole into her eyes; she sighed a little; and then, as the old light flashed back suddenly into her face, she turned consideringly to Tet, and said, in low tones, "Sithi, Tet, when Aw throw misel' at his yed he winna have me—— Naa, then! my fayther's watchin' thi."

Old Nat certainly was watching with all the eyes in his head, and Tet Swindells drew her other leg up under her, and sat hugging herself and blinking both eyes at express speed. But Jesse was bold enough at last, and a moment later he was hugging the half-hysterical Milly to his breast, and positively sobbing in the passion of his joy. She did not resist; the little strength she had seemed suddenly to have left her, and she leaned limp and wan on his breast, a smile of painful joy upon her lips, and a soft, tear-dimmed light in her eyes. Old Nat sat on the settle staring about him with rolling, wide-opened eyes, and struggling pathetically with his inability to articulate, whilst Tet's eyes and mouth expressed every kind of emotion of which they were capable, as she looked here and there and everywhere except at the happy couple.

If all the joy of all the people who were keeping up Noyton Wakes that day could be gathered up into one quivering heart, Jesse told himself, that heart would not contain one tithe of the joy that was swelling within his breast. The stang riding! The Scholeses' perplexing poverty! That mysterious stranger of the night before,

who had reaped the rich harvest of Milly's lips before himself! What cared he? Milly was his, let the world say and prove what it liked. She might herself be and do what she chose, she was his, once for all and for ever *his*, and he was absolutely content.

"This is a rum sooart of a wakesin', this is," grumbled Tet, after waiting for nearly half an hour in the vain hope that the silly couple would remember that they were not alone.

"Wakes? Hay, my days, we'll have a wakes. We'll ha' th' grandist wakes ta-day as iver wur i' Slagdin, wench;" and Milly sprang up and began to fly about the house like a wild thing. She snatched Tet from her seat, spun her across the floor in three steps of a whirling dance, flew at her father, pulled his nightcap right, and dabbed a flying kiss on the end of his nose; whisked the kettle from the hob to the rack-and-hook, dashed with the poker at the dim fire, in total disregard of the white hearth, ordered Jesse to bring coals, asked Tet what she would like for a "gradely wakes tay," and then, tossing a two-shilling-piece to her as heedlessly as though it had been a penny, sent her off for crumpets, muffins, new-laid eggs, and—oh! unheard-of extravagance—marmalade. It is not always easy to sympathise with a joy you don't in the least understand, but as old Nat seemed to know something that made him beam in his gentle, dignified way, Jesse, infected by the prevalent gladness, was quite content to take things on trust for the moment, and so he

and Tet, eager, though in very different ways, to believe the very best, yielded themselves to the magic influence of Milly's happiness, and there gathered at the Mangle House table that day four of the happiest souls on earth.

"Th' manglin's no' gerrin' on varry fast," said Jesse, with a delighted grin, as he crammed the buttered crumpets into his mouth.

"Manglin'!" and Milly whisked round to the old machine and gazed musingly at it for a moment. Then she rose, hastily unscrewed the handle and hung it on a nail against the opposite wall, and then, slipping the nut into her pocket, she cried, addressing the mangle, "Aw've a good moind, Aw've a good moind, sithi! never ta let thee turn anuther rowler-full. Hay, bless thi! tha's bin a friend ta me i' my trubble, an' tha'st have a share o' my happiness."

She was as good as her word for that day, at least; and but for the unusual gaiety of her manner and his own impatience to get some explanation, Jesse would have been perfectly happy. The days were beginning to "take in" a little, and as this was old Nat's first day out of bed, he soon tired, and had to be put to rest. Tet also took her departure, after a brief whispered interview with the mistress of the house, and then, down there in that old back garden, Jesse listened to such a tale as he had never neither heard or read before. He stared, he exclaimed, he thanked God in one breath and almost swore in the next; he laughed, but the tears came rushing

at the same moment, and almost choked him; and when at last she finished, and he realised all she had been and done and suffered, he turned a struggling face up to the twilight and cried, through blinding tears, "O Lord, Aw'll preich my yed off naa, if Tha wants me."

It began to feel a little chilly, and Milly arose to go indoors; but the night was so calm, and his heart so full, that he begged her to fetch a shawl and give him a little more time.

When she returned with her wrap, they began to walk up and down the narrow, overgrown path. There was not much talk, and every now and again the happy voices of villagers returning from the Wakes were heard. The silence grew longer: Milly was thinking, and Jesse was too happy for speech. She glanced up at him now and again as they wandered about, and her face, which had been serious all the evening, seemed to be recovering some of its archness.

"Ther's nobbut wun thing as trubbles me naa," she murmured, as they moved along.

"Wot's that, wench?"

"We conna have iverything, an' God's bin wunderful good; but Aw should ha' loiked it."

"Tha'st hev it if it con be gotten. Wot is it?"

Milly thought a little, her face excessively sober, and her manner pensive. "Aw'm afeart tha wodna dew it if Aw axed thi."

"Me? Aw'd jump o'er a four-storey factory if tha wanted me. Wot is it?"

She was listening attentively, lifted a little sigh

of gentle resignation, and then said, with a slow shake of the head, "Tha wodna! Aw know tha wodna."

"Wot is it, woman? Aw tell thi Aw'd dew owt! Aat wi' it!"

She was still considering, with her head down, and had pulled up to poke a weed out of the edge of the path with her clog. Then she looked up, her countenance as solemn as a judge's. There came a little quizzical curl into the corner of her mouth, and she said demurely, "Tha couldn't merry tew on uz, could ta, lad?"

She darted away as soon as she had got her question out, but he soon caught her, and holding her by the arm, he shook her playfully and cried, "Aw'st hev a foine seet mooar nor Aw con manidge wi' thee; bud who's t'other?"

"Emma. Hay, lad, hoo's a bonny, bonny wench, an' as good as hoo's pratty. It spoils my happiness ta think of her."

This was said with deep and genuine earnestness, and Jesse, laughing and yet puzzled, cried, "Aw conna commit bigamy, woman. Wot's th' use o' talkin'?"

She was a little in advance of him on the path, and did not at once reply. Her absent manner made him doubt whether she had heard. Presently she cried, "Conna tha foind her a gradely noice yung felley, an' let's have a double-barrilled weddin'?"

Jesse looked at her in wondering delight. "Hay, wench, tha thinks of iverybody but thisel';"

and then, with a sudden flash, he continued, "Haa'd your 'Siah dew?"

Milly opened her eyes and stared at him until he had to turn his head away, so hard was she thinking.

"Tha's hit it tew a toucher! A double weddin' loike that 'ud fill mi cup to th' brim."

And Jesse, thinking most of the heroic girl before him and the story he had heard that night, said earnestly, "If tha wants it, wench, tha'll get it. Tha's drunk sa mitch o' th' cup o' sorrow, thi cup o' jye mun be full to th' lid."

CHAPTER XXII

WOBBLING BILLY

WHILST the events narrated in the last chapter were transacting themselves at the Mangle House, David Brooks and his party were taking decisive steps to bring Milly before a church court and procure her expulsion from membership. And here David was learning a very shrewd lesson as to the eccentricity and inconsistency of human nature. The riding of the stang had been the high-water mark of prejudice and indignation against the Mangle House girl and her married sweetheart, and it appeared to David that the whole village was united in emphatic condemnation of the incomprehensible woman who had so shockingly sullied the honour of the Methodist Church. Saul Swindells and old Seth stood out, but they were never like anybody else, and of course Jesse Bentley had very sufficient reasons for his attitude, although David heard nothing but astonishment expressed that Jesse should still believe in Milly, for was he not the person of all others who ought to have felt injured? If he was willing to support and defend

Milly, as seemed certain, it only went to show that he was a weak-spirited simpleton, willing to take other people's cast-offs, and therefore beneath consideration.

Then came the oboist's assault. That irate instrumentalist had come over from Wiskit Hill, called him out of the house into the yard, had taken him by the scruff of the neck and kicked and "clouted" him until David bellowed for assistance, and had to be rescued by his mother and sister. In the disgrace of this thrashing, however, David had one consolation. An attack of this kind was the very thing to appeal to the sympathies of his neighbours, and henceforth all the women at any rate would be on his side. Never did he show more complete ignorance of female nature, and never did he experience so complete and unpleasant a surprise. His male supporters took not the slightest pains to conceal their contempt of him, and when he turned to the women his astonishment deepened into dismay. The "wenches" curled their lips and tittered as he passed them, and when he sought explanations, they turned their faces up the fold in pretended alarm, and cried, "Run, Davit! Heigh thi! Th' Wiskit Hill felley's cumin'!" and then turned their backs upon him and deliberately walked away. He thought he was sure of Mrs. Seth Pollit, but when he had told her the tale of his humiliation, and bared his arm to show a big blue-and-black bruise, she bent down over it, scrutinised it anxiously for a

moment, and then said, in tones of mock-motherly sympathy, "Poor little felley! Mun Aw kiss it better?"

This was bad enough, but when he returned home and poured out the tale of his woes to his women-folk, his own sister Tizzy turned round upon him with scornful eyes and called him a "snifterin' Bessy-bab" who couldn't stand up for himself.

David was too astounded to reply, and when he recovered himself he could only conclude that something had gone seriously wrong with the world. Maria Bentley, Jesse's blustering sister, however, was still faithful to him, and affected great indignation at the conduct of the others. Maria was just suffering from her defeat in the matter of Emma Cunliffe, and so was ripe for any sort of mischievous action. She enlarged with great indignation on the cowardliness of the oboist's appeal to force, and insisted that nothing short of legal proceedings would meet the case; and though David did not seem very anxious to take up her suggestion, he was glad enough of her help, and so she set to work to rally his supporters and arrange the plan of campaign. She would never be able to "howd up mi yed i' Slagdin" until that disgraceful Milly had been turned out of the Society.

David held the post of Sunday-school librarian, and must at once resign to the superintendent minister, and state his reasons. She would do the same in her position as female leader, and

Billy Whiffle must send in his books as Society steward. Then she bethought her of another expedient, and got up a petition, or round robin, to the minister, insisting on the instant removal of Milly Scholes from membership, and expressing a strong sense of the evil which that misguided young woman had done to the Church.

Three resignations and a petition would surely stiffen the back of the most weak and time-serving minister, and, think what he might, he would be compelled to take summary action. The undisguised contempt which his cowardly endurance of the oboist's chastisement had brought upon him rankled deeply, and stirred David's dull soul as nothing else had done, and he lusted after full and complete revenge. Notwithstanding these feelings, however, it is doubtful whether he would have done anything notable but for the energetic efforts of the pushful Maria. She brought him the petition, signed for the most part in her own handwriting, handed in at the same time her own class-book, with an accompanying letter, and finally suggested that David and Billy Whiffle should take advantage of the Wakes holiday and wait upon the superintendent minister. Billy's support was important— essential, in fact — and so, when he returned from work on the evening before the Wakes, David washed and re-dressed himself, and presently made his way to the steward's house. All day long in the mill where he worked he had been telling such Slagdenites as he came across

that they would "yer summat" in a day or two, and on his way home he had thrown out hints to every group of villagers he had passed of an approaching crisis, which he called a "ter'ble shindy." But the unbelieving jeers with which his prophecies had been received daunted him somewhat, and he had to take a long walk in the fields before he could muster up courage to approach Billy's dwelling. The steward was one of David's tenants, and a little behind in his rent, in consequence of a period of slackness and a consequent change of masters. David therefore felt that he had an additional claim on the official's support. Billy was a garrulous and fussy sort of fellow, with a pouncing, emphatic manner, which his actual character scarcely justified.

"Hello, Davit! Cum in wi' thi! Sithi! Aw wur just sayin' to aar Tilly—worn't Aw, Tilly? —Aw wur just sayin' if Aw'd a thaasand paand Aw'd spend ivery bodle on it i' lawin' yond Wiskit Hill wastril. Worn't Aw sayin' that this varry minit, Tilly?"

"Thaa wur, lad."

"Law! Aw'd ram a Cooart o' Queen's Bench warrant intew him. Aw'd hev him i'th New Bailey afoor he wur a day owder."

"Well, but——" began David.

"Well, but—— Dunna talk ta me, Davit Brooks! If tha doesn't mak' him dance loike a foo' at a brunfoire, Aw've dun wi' thi!"

"Dunna fret tha fat, Billy; but it's t'other mon as——"

"T'other? Th' Super, tha meeans? Ne'er thi moind him. Aw'm steward here, am nor Aw? Thee leeav' him ta me. Aw'll bring that mon afoor his betters, Aw con tell thi. Aw'll mak' it a Cunference job for him. Ay, lad, sit thi daan. Tilly, reich that cher, an' gi' me mi poipe."

Accepting the proffered seat, David propped his elbow on the table and began to mop his brow with his handkerchief, whilst Billy marched about the hearthrug, and filled his pipe with a bouncing, truculent air that boded ill for the enemies of David.

David continued his face-mopping for some little time, and then, just as the excited and belligerent steward was applying a "spell" to his pipe, the young man ventured, "Well, Aw'm thinkin' o' goin' to th' Super ta-morn."

"Tha art? That's summat loike! An' dunna thee goo wi' thi tail between thi legs. Tha mun ston' up tew him, mon. Ne'er moind his hectorin'; tha mun bullock him, if he cums ony of his lip wi' thi. Hay, Aw wuish Aw wur goin' wi' thi! Aw'd com' his yure fur him! Yo' yung chaps is sa freetened."

"That's wot Aw've cum ta ax thi abaat."

"Me? me? Ta-morn?" and Billy's face suddenly became blank with alarm.

"Ay; tha said tha wod, tha knows."

Billy stared helplessly at his visitor, with dropped jaw and suddenly confused manner. "Hay, wot a pity! Aw conna goo ta-morn, chuseheaw."

"Why not? It's th' Wakes, tha knows."

"Ay, ay. Hay, wot a pity!" and Billy's eyes rolled round in evident search for some excuse. "Aw—Aw—Aw'm goin' t' build a new pig-hoile i'th morn, an' Aw've getten th' mortar mixed. Nay, sithi! it's better fur thi ta goo by thisel'; if Aw goo, Aw'st brast aat on him, an' ger i' sum lumber, that's wot Aw'st dew, Aw'm that razzored."

"Aw'll cum an' help thi wi' th' coit, an' we can goo efther."

"Ay, ay, fur sewer; bu—bud Aw hev to goo ta Billy Haases efther."

Now, David would have been only too glad to find some insuperable hindrance for himself, but being now committed to it, the idea of going alone seemed peculiarly dreadful to him. "Well, wilt goo at neet? Aw'll borra Jim Tidy's trap, an' we con drive."

"Bud — bud——" Billy seemed quite agitated, but whether with disappointment that he was not able to accompany his friend, or fear lest David should over-persuade him, it would be difficult to say. "Aw'm stoppin' to mi tay; Aw'st no' be whoam till dark. Besoide, them parsons is niver in of a neet, tha knows."

Tilly, sympathising with her husband's dilemma, but dreadfully afraid of him vexing their landlord, brought David a drink of herb beer.

David, however, could not be satisfied; the prospect of going alone was simply terrifying,

and so, pushing the pot testily away, he cried, "Bud Aw conna goo bi misel', an' it's thy wark, tha knows."

"Me? Hay, bless thi, mon, he doesn't cur a button-top fur me; it's thee an' yore folk as he's feart on."

With troubled face David stared a while at his wriggling friend, and then asked sullenly, "Wilt goo o' Setterday?"

"Setterday?" and Billy, now fairly in a corner, grew desperate and a little angry. "We conna wait till then, mon. Away wi' thi, an' ger it dun wi'. He's as quiet as an owd sheep; tha's nowt ta be feart on."

"Bud tha said just naa he wur highty-tighty."

"Ay, wi' sum folk! He'll be as reet as a rubbin'-stoan wi' thi. Isn't he fur turnin' hur aat hissel', mon?"

"Haa dust know?"

"Aw know. Off wi' thi! Th' chap's as quiet as a pot-doll, an' he thinks a seet o' yore folk."

But at this moment the door opened, and to David's great relief Maria Bentley came fussing in. Billy looked anxiously round, as though searching for some way of escape; but David was too quick for him, and Maria, guessing something of the position of affairs, and judging shrewdly that young Brooks would never venture to beard the Super alone, began at once her attack upon the halting and shifty steward, and chased him from one point of refuge to another, until poor Billy scarcely knew whereunto he must fly. To

make matters worse, Maria found that she had to bear the brunt of the conflict alone, and that even if she succeeded with Billy she would still have David to deal with. In this situation she offered to accompany them, and to her intense indignation discovered that they would either of them go alone rather than face such an alternative. At length, with the assistance of Billy's wife, she got the matter arranged, though David, as he went away, did not appear anything like as satisfied as he ought to have done, and the worthy steward guarded his consent with so many strict conditions that his young companion protested that he might just as well stay at home.

Billy overslept himself next morning, at least so he said; for when David, looking as miserable as though he were going to have his teeth drawn, called to look up his friend, Billy had only just got out of bed, and when he did begin to prepare for the journey probably took longer time over his toilet than he had ever done in his life. Consequently they missed the train they had selected, and it looked as though they would not even catch the next. On the journey down to Noyton Station Billy's manner changed entirely; he became spasmodically jocose, rallied David on looking "as sayrious as a cowd chizil," and alluded to the minister they were going to interview in the most flippant and slighting manner. As they left Aldershaw Station, however, he changed his tune again, and for several moments never uttered a word. Suddenly he pulled up, his face

portentously elongated, and his eyes standing out with fear.

"Why, mon, he'll happen tak' 'em!"

"Tak' wot?"

"Tak' th' bewks! He'll happen ler uz resign, an' then wheer shall we be?"

"Well, isn't that wot tha's cum fur?"

"Bud Aw'st be aat of office, lumpyed! Aw'st be shunted!"

David, who was secretly quite as much perturbed as his companion, saw that the expedition threatened to break down even now unless something were done, and so, crying earnestly, "Ger aat wi' thi! he dar'na!" he took his friend by the arm and began to drag him slowly along. Billy's feet seemed suddenly to have become lead, and he hung back more and more every yard they went. When they reached the manse gate he made a sudden bolt, and the domestic cleaning the upstairs window beheld two men, evidently from the country, chasing down the street at the top of their speed, the younger one shouting after the other, and threatening all sorts of direful penalties. Having recaptured his supporter, David dragged him back to the gate, and then there arose another fierce debate as to who should lead the way. At last David, holding his man firmly by the coat-sleeve, rang the door-bell, and then, waiting for the moment when the handle was turned, he skipped deftly behind Billy, and left him to face things out.

"Is th' mestur in, yung woman?" and Billy,

though his voice was unnaturally loud and defiant, glanced up at the servant in mortal fear.

"Yes, sir; step in. What name?"

"Wot?"

"Hoo wants ta know thi name," cried David, giving him a poke forward.

"Name? Billy Whiffle. He knows me weel enuff; we're fro' Slagdin."

A moment later they were conducted upstairs, where they found the minister seated at his desk with the skeleton of the new Circuit plan before him. The usual greetings having been exchanged, the Super retired to an easy-chair and waited for his visitors to introduce their business.

The two sat on the outermost edge of their chairs and stared hard at the ceiling, David struggling with the miserable consciousness that perspiration was forming in a huge globule on the end of his nose, which he daren't for the life of him touch, and Billy mutely promising his Maker that if he ever got out of that study he would never, never meddle with any such business again.

The minister guessed something of their errand, but as he was generally entertained when in Slagden at the Brookses', and Billy was the village official with whom he had most to do, he felt that it was only polite to suppose that they might be making a social call, and so he waited, whilst the impetuous little clock on the mantelpiece tore away at its noisy work, as though in a tremendous hurry to overtake something.

"Beautiful morning, gentlemen."

David tardily admitted that it was, and turned to see why Billy had left him to answer. That worthy was pulling a long, dubious face at the ceiling, as though doubtful whether even so much ought to be admitted at this stage of the proceedings.

"Anything fresh at Slagden?" inquired the minister.

David turned a scowling face towards his companion, but the steward, motionless as a statue, kept his eyes sternly fixed on the moulding in the far corner of the study, and drew down the corners of his mouth to express weary and pitiful contempt for the world and all that was in it. The Super waited in placid patience, into which a slight feeling of contempt began to creep as he glanced from one to the other of his wooden visitors. At a second glance his eye caught David's, and so, boiling over with indignation at Billy, and full of his great mission, the younger man blurted out, "Billy's cum ta resign, sir."

"Resign?" cried the minister, in mild surprise; but Billy, his face a shade paler and very much longer, kept his eyes on the moulding, and replied, "*He's* cum ta resign, an' Aw've cum ta—ta—bring him."

"Ay, an' thee an' aw! Tha said tha wod! Noan o' thi shufflin' wark, naa!" and David glared fiercely at his companion, entirely ignoring the presence of their pastor.

Now, the Super had recently found reason to

regret having changed old Seth Pollit for the pusillanimous Billy, and so, not the least disturbed at the terrible announcements just made, he asked quietly, "What has caused you to think of resigning, Mr. Whiffle?"

"Aw dunna! Aw winna! Aw wur nob-but——"

But David had lost all patience, and so he burst in, "It's abaat yond Milly Scholes; hoo's ruinin' th' S'ciety."

"Well, but if there is trouble that is a reason for everybody standing to the guns, and not throwing up like a lot of schoolboys."

"Aw didna! Aw didna!" and then, turning fiercely upon his friend, Billy cried indignantly, "Aw winna resign, chuze wot tha says."

"Well, well, Mr. Whiffle, don't excite yourself. Sit down, and let us hear all about it."

"It's yond Milly Scholes, sir. We conna stand it. She's splittin' th' church an' drivin' aw dacent folk away," said David.

"Aw shud ne'er resignt' bud for him," whined Billy, with a doleful wag of his head.

It took some time to get the case stated, and when David had finished a highly-coloured story, the Super replied, "Yes, but we must proceed in order. Who brings the charge, Mr. Steward?"

"Charge?" interjected David, now eager enough. "We know it! We aw know it!"

"Yes, yes; but somebody must prefer a charge —her leader or the steward."

"Me? me? Nay, Aw've nowt ageean her, th' brazzened little besom!"

Hiding a smile behind his hand, the minister proceeded, "You see, gentlemen, we have to be careful of each other's characters. Our duty is to protect each other, and believe the best of each other."

"If hoo isna turn't aat, wee'st aw leeav', an' yo'll ha' ta preich ta pew-backs, that's wot wee'st dew;" and David looked savagely at the minister.

"Yes, but even then we cannot do wrong, you know. All you say may be perfectly true, but we cannot proceed on mere hearsay. But come now, tell me the story your own way, and let us see where we are."

His tone was quiet and persuasive, and so, with this encouragement, the two deputies commenced, and for the next ten minutes they assisted each other in detailing Milly's manifold transgressions, culminating, of course, in the iniquity which had provoked the scandalous stang riding.

The minister looked serious, and was certainly very attentive; but when they had exhausted their charges he nonplussed them by asking, "But why all this talk of resigning?"

"We wanten her thrut eawt, an' we'll hev her thrut eawt," cried David doggedly.

"But how will resigning help you?"

The Slagden deputation looked helpless and confused, and the longer they stared at each other the more foolish they felt.

"Would your resignation make any difference

to Miss Scholes? Would it be any proof of her guilt?"

"It 'ud show which soide we wur on, wodn't it?"

"But you are Christian men; you are on the side of justice, are you not?"

"An' this is justice; hoo's disgraced uz aw, hesn't hoo?"

"Perhaps so. But what if it should turn out you have disgraced yourselves? And if you resign, you know——"

There was another long silence, and at last Billy, turning and glaring indignantly at his companion, cried, "Tha's browt me on a bonny foo's harand, tha has;" and as the younger man was about to retort in kind, the minister broke in, "No, no, gentlemen; you were quite right in reporting this to me. But this talk of resignation is —well, if you'll excuse me saying so—a little silly, isn't it? I will arrange for a leaders' meeting next week, and you, Mr. Whiffle——"

"Me? Nay, no' me! Aw've dun wi' this dirty job, Aw hev!" and then, with another fierce look at David, he went on, "Aw should ne'er ha' bin i' this lumber bud fur thee. If hoo wodna ha' thi, hoo *wodna* ha' thi, an' that's aw abaat it."

The Super's eyes twinkled; he was getting new light. So David was a rejected lover, was he? Then he smiled to himself, and went on, "I'll write you to-day, Mr. Whiffle, and fix the time for the meeting. Only you must have the charges ready—and the witnesses."

Billy began an indignant refusal, but catching David's eye, he wobbled again, and subsided into an indistinct mumble.

They now rose to depart, and David, in complete forgetfulness of the carefully prepared petition in his pocket, sulkily followed his companion down the stairs; and when they had gone the cleric stood musing for a moment or two in the hall, and then, as he returned to his study, he said to himself, "If I have many more Slagdenites to see me, I shall be that girl's friend in spite of myself."

That night, though Billy had refused to return with his colleague, and stayed in Aldershaw all day, it was reported at the gable-end that the minister was coming the following week to expel Milly Scholes from the Society.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GREAT TRIAL

THAT same Wakes day which brought such happiness to Jesse Bentley, and provided an opportunity for Billy Whiffle and David Brooks to visit the Superintendent, was also one of great activity on the part of Maria Bentley. Having made sure that her fellow-conspirators had actually started on their errand, she commenced forthwith to excite as much interest and secure as much sympathy for her side as was possible. The young folk had for the most part gone off on various short excursions, but the elders were at home, and to these she turned with solemn face and much well-simulated concern. She was profoundly sorry for old Nat Scholes: for such a man to have reached his time of life, and now to have so great a trial, was terrible indeed, and he was "sitch a grand owd preicher an' sich a saint—the craytur!" Hay dear! it's ter'ble wark havin' childer. Aw'm thankful to Goodniss Aw ne'er hed noan. Yo' tew an' tile an' moile for 'em, an' then, when they shud bring yo' sum cumfurt, they just breiken yur herts," she said to

old Sam Dodge and his wife, who had their own reasons for sighing and shaking their heads at her sympathetic words.

"Ay, Aw dar' say yo're capt at me, bud Aw conna help it," she replied to those who manifested surprise at this most uncommon concern of hers about the old herbalist, for whom she had not had a good word for many a long month. "Aw've nor allis seen hee ta hee wi' Nat, but trubble's trubble, an' this 'ull finish him. Mi hert bleeds fur him—the impident besom hur!"

But in her wanderings from house to house Maria encountered an unexpected difficulty: the villagers had an incurable dislike to outside interference in their affairs, and the dread of this was in some cases even stronger than their indignation against Milly. Many an unsatisfactory church member had been quietly put away in Slagden without all this to-do, and if they were to have ministers and other strangers prying into their doings, they preferred that the offender should go unpunished. This induced Maria to "fiddle on another string," as she put it. They knew how high Slagden stood in the esteem of the Circuit, and how "wëel thowt on" it was. Were they to lose their good name for ever and involve themselves in Milly's disgrace by appearing to condone her disgraceful conduct? They must clear themselves; they must show people that though they would not tolerate any one interfering in their affairs, they knew what was expected of them, and could do their duty with the best.

But even this change of tune did not bring her the success she sought; the villagers knew her, especially the chapel people, and though always glad enough to hear her tit-bits of gossip, they were not at all pleased at the prospect of a formal inquiry and all the unsavoury notoriety it would bring. And so Maria had to ransack her brain and recall every forgotten grievance the Slagdenites had against the mangle people. She was not by any means as well received as she expected even then, but her success was perhaps greater than she supposed; and a feeling of dull, angry resentment against Milly burned in many a village breast that night. When she had worked her way round to the house of David Brooks, however, she found a reception which amply atoned for the coolness she had received elsewhere; and when, as they sat over early tea, David returned with the information that a leaders' meeting was to be held the following week, Maria would have felt rewarded for all her pains and her zeal for the purity of the Church but for a little misgiving that David's manner was not as confident as his words. Just on the edge of dark the other member of the deputation returned, and Maria's drooping spirits were immediately revived. Billy was magnificent—satisfactory from every point of view. He gratified her woman's craving for details to the full, and described almost to weariness every small incident of the expedition. He enlarged with injured scorn on the cowardly pusillanimity of David and the shifty slipperiness

of the Super, and made it abundantly clear that but for his own uncompromising firmness and intrepid courage the thing would never have been accomplished. To encourage him, and thus get every atom of his story, Maria complimented him with mendacious extravagance, and he threw up his head and stalked about on the sanded floor basking in the admiring light of two wondering women's eyes. The arrival of a brief note next morning, fixing the meeting for the following Monday, completed Billy's triumph. Every Methodist with any pretensions to respectability in Slagden had a peep at that note, and was asked to admit that at last they had a steward in Slagden who could "bring th' nobs daan to ther nawpins."

And whilst Slagden was thus exciting itself about the coming meeting and the circumstances connected with it, the painfully anxious Superintendent was worrying himself a good deal about the same thing. He could not conceal from himself that the men who had waited upon him might be right, in spite of their clumsy and clownish way of going about things; and, on the other hand, if Milly was the girl they said she was, he was altogether out of it as a judge of character—a conclusion he was not very willing to admit. It was only a passing episode in village life, and yet it troubled him more than greater matters might have done; and this discovery only contributed to his deeper annoyance. Then he remembered that one of his colleagues was a Lancashire man, and might be

able to throw some light on the point, and so he went off for a consultation. But No. 2 was as bad as the lay officials of the Circuit: he laughed at his story of Billy's and David's visit, and declared that the only serious thing about the affair was that he was allowing himself to be troubled about it. He assured his superior that there was nothing that need distress him, and, when he saw he was not succeeding in relieving the other's mind, offered to undertake the affair himself. But the Super was the Super, and a man of order, with a high sense of the dignity and responsibility of his office, and so he went away, scolding himself for his old propensity of making too much of trifles.

On his way home he called at the large house next to the bank, which was the residence of the manager. That functionary was a leading Methodist, and though he had only occupied his present position about two years, he had recently, on the demise of the Circuit steward, been appointed his successor. The Super found his chief officer in his private room, enveloped in smoke and lolling in an easy-chair. He was a fair, burly man of great size, the picture of easy comfort. He had small twinkling eyes and plenty of healthy colour, but the cut of his square chin belied his otherwise complacent expression. In response to a lazy, though very warm welcome, the minister dropped into a chair with a little sigh.

"Hello! sighing? What's amiss, sir? Here, have a cigar, and 'drive dull care away.'"

The minister, as his friend well knew, was a strong anti-tobacconist, and shook his head with a gesture of playful disgust.

"No, thanks. I'm all right, only a little annoyance in one of the country places—Slagden, in fact."

The Circuit steward yawned. "Oh, never bother about that; always something in this weary world, and you teetotal, anti-smoking fellows are such a serious lot. Nothing like a good cigar for making you philosophical. What is it now?" and he leaned back in his chair, the picture of lazy unconcern.

"Some scandal about old Scholes's daughter —but you won't know him—before your time."

"Slagden? Old Scholes? Now, where have I heard that name? Nathaniel Scholes, is it?" and the manager manifested sudden interest.

"I believe the name is Nathaniel. He used to be a popular local preacher. His daughter seems a flighty sort of creature—but it is no use troubling you with it."

At the same time, the minister could not help noticing that the manager had become exceedingly attentive all at once, and was letting his cigar go out.

"Well, but I'm interested; I know—— But go on. Put your feet on that stool, and tell me all about it, please."

The Super's only complaint against his favourite officer was that he never took things seriously enough, and made jokes about even

the gravest matters. Encouraged, therefore, by a soberness which he attributed to kindly interest in himself, he told all he knew about the case in hand, and enlarged somewhat on difficulties with which it seemed to be beset. He was disappointed, however, to discover that after the first few minutes his friend was not listening. He had attended eagerly enough whilst he was explaining all about the Scholeses and the charges against Milly; but when he entered into his own perplexities the manager seemed to go off into musings of his own, and was obviously not following. There was a long pause. The Super had begun to wish he had never spoken; this was a busy man, though the soul of easy kindness, and it was but natural that he should take little interest in such pettifogging affairs. But all at once the other asked, "And when do you say the meeting is to be?"

"On Monday next, and I hope I shall be able to get done with it then."

The manager had another fit of meditation, during which he took a small diary out of his pocket and consulted it. "Mr. Super, I should like to go with you to Slagden, if I may."

"You? Nonsense! I really couldn't bother you with such a thing."

"I suppose you mean that I have no *locus standi*?"

"Oh, as to that, you are Circuit steward, and nobody would object; but, Mr. Cartwright,

it isn't worth your while, it isn't really. It would only waste your time—and—and annoy you."

"Then I'll go with you; I may even be able to help you. Come down here for a cup of tea, and we'll drive over."

The minister, surprised and puzzled, continued his protests; but the manager, expressing a strong curiosity to see "th' chapil i'th ginnel," as the Slagden sanctuary was often called, insisted on having his way, and so it was arranged as he had suggested.

Never had the gable-end Parliament so many and such protracted sittings as during the days between Noyton Wakes and the ever-memorable night when Milly Scholes was tried for her sins.

The bench against the house-end was filled every evening, and those uncomfortable opposition seats in the old pear-tree's naked roots were fully occupied. The debates, interminable and windy, were nevertheless very unsatisfactory. Billy Whiffle, in a state of chronic elation, told the story of the visit to the Super every night for the benefit of some fresh listener, and by Sunday the additional embellishments rendered the story barely recognisable to those who had heard the first bald outline. David Brooks appeared a less and less heroic figure every time the story was rehearsed, but he was so anxious to keep Billy in his present state of mind that it was only at some unusually outrageous piece of exaggeration,

and when the tale told most cruelly against himself, that he ventured to demur; and even then, when Billy produced that *pièce de résistance*, the Super's mandate for the meeting, he was fain to take refuge in silence.

Peter Jump, the blacksmith, achieved undesirable distinction by propounding a novel and altogether unpopular explanation of the case. Milly was more to be pitied than blamed. All musicians were known to be "fawse" and "gallous" where women were concerned, and the oboist had simply collogued Milly into flirtation by his own overpowering fascinations; but as this was a reflection on his class, Dan Stott the choirmaster repudiated it with the utmost scorn, and thus much of the time for debate was occupied in what was to most of the senators mere frivolous by-play. What puzzled some of the more silent and reflective was that those two doughty old champions, Seth and Saul, although most exemplary in their attendance, took no part whatever in the deliberations, Saul contenting himself with looks of owlish wisdom and an "I-could-a-tale-unfold" sort of expression, supplemented by sudden and utterly inexplicable bursts of laughter, whilst Seth sat in stolid silence, consuming most alarming quantities of tobacco, and listening to all that was said with his old wooden, expressionless look. Another perplexing circumstance was the manner and conduct of Milly during these portentous days. In the daytime, mangle or no mangle, she was

almost always singing. One night she went off to sing at the Pye Green harvest festival, and *came home in a cab*; and this staggering story was capped next day by the information that she had taken her father out that very afternoon for a drive, a mere pleasure trip, and had paid the landlord of the "Dog and Gun" three-and-sixpence for the hire of the conveyance. Behind the former of these stories there was a suggestion so dark that even the baser spirits dared not hint at it, and had to be content with rolling their eyes round at each other with looks significant of unutterable things. That she had got poor weak-minded Jesse Bentley into her clutches once more was only too evident, for that infatuated young man walked boldly to the Mangle House before the very eyes of the assembled Parliament every night, and sometimes had not returned when the sittings were adjourned.

To an extra sitting, got together apparently by mere instinct immediately after the Sunday morning service, Billy Whiffle, with gaping mouth and bulging eyes, brought two fresh pieces of information. The first was that Milly Scholes had put a whole half-crown into the collection-box that morning, and the other that the third minister, who had occupied the pulpit, had brought word that Billy was to have all the witnesses ready, but keep them in another room, not too far away from the one in which the meeting should be held. The commission spoilt Billy's dinner, and his tea also, for that matter; but late

that night he was able to inform the gable-enders that he had got Maria Bentley, David and Tizzy Brooks, and a youth from Weaver's Yard to give evidence, but had failed altogether with Emma Cunliffe, who, though the most injured person in the village, according to Maria, peremptorily refused to have anything to do with what she was inconsiderate enough to call the "persecution" of the mangle girl. At noon on Monday Billy deemed the occasion of such exceptional importance that he had "knocked off" for the day, and afterwards most fervently wished he hadn't; for what with visits from such of the neighbours as were at home and brought new suggestions, intermittent badgerings from "owd Grunt," the deaf chapel-keeper, who insisted upon knowing which vestry he must get ready for the meeting, and the doleful lamentations of Billy's wife, who had forebodings, the poor official was worried almost to death; his own increasing nervous agitation making difficulties of things that would not have disturbed him for a moment under happier circumstances. All afternoon he snapped and snarled at his wife, and when Maria Bentley came round about four o'clock to give him a sort of final priming, he fell upon her fiercely as the author of all his troubles, ordered her out of the house in one breath and implored her not to desert him in this extremity in the next.

On his way from school Saul Swindells called to intimate, with a look of profoundest mystery, that Milly would be defended by counsel—*i.e.*,

himself; and as the schoolmaster was not in his blustering, but in his quiet mood, Billy's very soul quaked within him, and he wished both David Brooks and Maria Bentley at the bottom of the sea.

Then he began to show signs of illness, and heard his wife declare that he should not go out of the house that night for anybody, with considerable relief. "Tha knows best, wench," he murmured piteously. "Aw'm allis reet when Aw tak' noatice o' thee; Aw've said sa hunderds o' toimes."

A rumour, traced to Tet Swindells, that Milly had no intention of answering the charge preferred against her, gave the suffering steward temporary relief; but when the witnesses, according to his own strict injunctions, began to assemble at his house, Billy's physical affliction took a more serious turn, and he commenced to writhe and groan, with one hand on his stomach and the other on his brow, pacing restlessly about the sanded floor the while, and rejecting Maria's encouraging words with weary shakes of the head.

In spite of the fact that his cottage was now filled with curious neighbours, he dropped into his chair in complete collapse when some one brought the information that the minister had arrived, accompanied by the senior Circuit steward. The administration of aniseed and hot balm wine relieved him somewhat, but just as he was commencing an argument with the persistent

and remorseless Maria, that it wanted seventeen minutes to the time of the meeting, the door opened, and "owd Grunt" bawled out in the deaf man's loud manner, "Th' minister wants thi, Billy." The terrified official made a sudden dart for the staircase, ascended to his bedroom in two or three strides, banged and bolted the door, and was heard protesting plaintively from within that he "chucked th' job," and wouldn't be steward another minute for "aw th' brass i' Aldershaw Bank." It took fully ten minutes and much coaxing through the keyhole before David could induce his henchman to open the door, and when at last he was induced to start for the chapel, he walked thitherwards with Maria on one side and young Brooks on the other, with a group of half-grown girls and boys bringing up the rear. As he was thus conducted along, looking like a criminal going to execution, he was heard to protest that no power upon earth should induce him to remain any longer in his official position. Old Grunt, with characteristic perversity, had selected the minister's vestry, the smallest and most inconvenient room on the premises, for the meeting, and this meant that the witnesses would have to wait in the chapel until called upon. As the chapel-keeper was too deaf to be argued with, the minister had already taken his place at the vestry-table and was waiting the arrival of his colleagues. Peter Jump, as Poor steward, was also there, and Jacob o' th' Donkey-croft, who had succeeded old Scholes, as leader of an almost

extinct class which usually held its meetings at the leader's house. The Circuit steward, who with the aid of a lamp had been inspecting the curious old chapel, now sat on the preacher's right, with a sort of anticipatory twinkle in his eye. Billy was the only person in Slagden whom he knew, and when that worthy was conducted into the room by a young man and a perspiring female, he rose and held out his hand. Billy took the proffered palm very shyly, and in answer to an inquiry about his health, observed that it was "rayther dampish," which, though evidently intended as a comment upon the weather, exactly described his own condition.

Maria Bentley, in virtue of her office as leader, had a place in the meeting, and now claimed it for the first time by sinking into a seat by the wall side, whilst Billy's male sponsor retired into the chapel.

The Circuit steward sat back in his chair and prepared himself for entertainment. A shuffling footstep, heard above Billy's whisperings to the minister, announced a new-comer, and Seth Pollit, dragging his feet listlessly after him, strolled into the room, wearing the most wooden and stupid look. "Another character," said the steward to himself with relish, and he was just moving in his chair so as to be able to study the milkman, when his attention was diverted by another arrival. This was a tall, strong-featured man, of haughty mien, and dressed in funeral black. He carried in one hand an antique silk hat, which he held

out ostentatiously before him, and which had most obviously been polished for the occasion. The new-comer had on a portentously high collar, encircled by a many-folded ministerial necktie, over which the wearer surveyed the company with severe condescension. He had a long quill pen behind his ear, a small unspillable bottle of ink hung with a tape to the button of his waistcoat, a roll of foolscap paper in his hand, and a large book with several of the pages turned carefully down, under his arm. He surveyed the shrinking Billy with withering disdain, saluted the minister with cold non-committal formality, responded to his introduction to the Circuit steward with a long sweeping bow and a wave of his shiny hat, and took a seat next the milkman. The manager-steward metaphorically hugged himself; he had often heard tales about Saul Swindells, but evidently the half had not been told. Unlike his companion, the minister seemed depressed, and responded with mild deprecatory surprise to the steward's glance of suppressed mirth.

The meeting was now fully constituted, every person having a legal right to a seat being present, and the Super arose to open the proceedings with prayer. One person did not derive much profit from the exercise, for the visiting Circuit steward discovered in a moment or two that there were either a good many witnesses waiting in the chapel, or that several who were not witnesses had joined the others; for the larger building, with its one smoky-chimneyed

lamp, made an excellent whispering gallery, where several sibilant conversations were being carried on at the same time. Another and nearer sound causing him to open his eyes and turn his head, he was just in time to discover two faces flattened against the panes of the little high window, the sudden disappearance of which revealed for a moment the capped tops of a number of heads. The villagers were evidently intent on having some share in the proceedings. The devotions over, the minister, without resuming his seat, was proceeding to announce the business and suggest the best method of action, when a strong, harsh voice rang out from the far corner of the room, and Saul Swindells, drawn up to his full height and wearing a pair of formidable-looking spectacles, was heard demanding order. "I rise to a pint of horder, Mestur Cheermon."

"Well, Brother Swindells?"

"Is this meeting constitutionally constituated, sir?"

"I believe so; why not?"

"Chapter an' voss, sir, chapter an' voss;" and Saul held up and shook a large volume.

Whilst the minister puckered his brow to comprehend the meaning of the inquiry, Saul, obviously conscious that every eye was upon him, held his book at the proper seeing distance and glared at it in his fiercest manner.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you,"—began the minister.

"The law, sir, the legal dockyments; them as hinvokes the law should ston' by it, sir. Wot saith the Scripture, leastways Grindrod?"

The minister immediately named page and section, and scored heavily, the assembled leaders glancing with congratulatory nods at each other, whilst Seth Pollit, who sat next to his old companion, emitted a dismal groan. Saul was everlastingly thrusting Grindrod down their throats, but for once he had met his match.

The "counsel for the defence" looked a little dashed, but as this was not by any means the only arrow in his quiver, he cleared his voice noisily, held the book a little farther away, and went on, "Ha-hem! Secondly, as it were, hez the person or persons charged with the offence been duly notified of the meetin', with a list of the charges?"

"She has; I sent them to her myself through the post."

Saul was evidently not expecting this, and was consequently nonplussed. He stared hard at the chairman, fumbled with the pages of his book, took a confused and abashed glance round the room, and then, turning suddenly to Seth, and dropping into the vernacular, he cried, "Ger up, mon, an' aat wi' it!"

The Circuit steward's chair creaked as he shook his sides in silent laughter. The door of the chapel had opened a little, and a row of noses was visible in the aperture, whilst every pane of glass in the window had a face flattened against it.

"No, no," interposed the chairman, "we must proceed in order. We must remember, friends, that the character of a fellow-Christian is in our hands on one side, and the honour of our Church on the other. Let us proceed with deliberation. Brother Jump will perhaps take notes, as Brother—er—Whif—er—Parkinson is otherwise engaged; he has undertaken to prefer the charges."

"Me! Well, that's a licker. Aw've nowt ageean th' wench, not me!" and Billy shrank away from the table and spread out his hands in helpless protest. The minister glanced despairingly at his companion, who was biting his lip fiercely to keep back the laughter that brimmed in his eyes.

"Then I must do it myself;" and, after detailing the various items of the accusation, he mentioned that the Society steward had insisted on the expulsion of the offending member, and would now tell them why he had done so.

"If he doesna, ther's plenty as will; *Aw* will. If that dirty powsement stops i' th' S'ciety, Aw goo aat, an' theer's my bewk!" and Maria Bentley, hot and angry, flung her class register upon the table, and stood glaring, arms akimbo, at the chair. A sound of subdued applause came from the chapel, and as this made the minister aware for the first time that there were unlicensed spectators, he ordered the door to be closed.

"Let us proceed in order. What you say,

Sister Bentley, may be perfectly true, but, you see, it is not evidence. Here are certain definite charges, and we are here to have them proved or — or otherwise. Have you yourself seen anything in the conduct of Miss Scholes that was inconsistent with her position as a member amongst us?"

Maria had "seen nowt else," and began another tirade, until the minister had to stop her and insist on definite evidence. Then Billy Whiffle, with a nervous glance at the chapel door, whispered something to the chairman, and eventually the witnesses were called in one by one and heard, whilst Saul, who should have been listening to them and cross-examining, was carrying on a fierce whispered argument with Seth in the corner of the room.

Item after item of information was detailed, and the case began to look very black indeed against Milly, her enemies becoming more confident and elated every moment.

"But, my dear friends," protested the chairman, "there is nothing here to justify these very serious charges. Miss Scholes may have been indiscreet——"

"Nay, hoo hasna!" This was a new voice in the debate, and Seth, the speaker, who scorned to take any note of the stories told by his fellow-villagers, but who was roused at the remark, innocent though it was, of the preacher, rose to his feet, shuffled towards the table, and shouted, in what was to him unprecedented excitement,

"Hoo's noather indiscreet, as yo' cawn it, nor nowt else; hoo's th' dacentist an' th' consistentist member i' this S'ciety, an' Aw con prewve it!"

The vestry door was pushed open an inch or two. Billy Whiffle and Maria Bentley were both on their feet and speaking at once, but the minister made them sit down, and then bade Seth proceed.

"Perceed? Perceed yursel'! ther's been ta mitch perceedin' i' this business;" and Seth, almost beyond himself with indignation, plunged on: "Th' wench geet thick wi' yon chap 'cause he did wot we owt ta ha' dun, an' helped her ta mak' a bit o' brass an' feed her deein' fayther! The'r' poor—desprit poor, an' hoo's foughten wi' it an' foughten wi' it loike a blessed little queen, an' this is wot hoo's getten for it! O friends! friends!"—and here his voice was broken by a choking sob,—"O friends! Aw wur niver shawmed o' my birthplace tin ta-neet! bud Aw'm shawmed fur it naa—shawmed to mi varry soul!"

A dead silence fell on the company, the minister staring at Seth without seeing him, and blinking his eyes as though to keep something back, whilst the visitor blew his nose with unnecessary loudness.

"Goo on, mon! that's nobbut th' intryduction; give 'em th' sarmon!" and Saul was leaning forward, his chin over the chair before him, and his face glowing with enthusiasm. Thus

admonished and full of a congenial theme, Seth dashed into the tale of his and Saul's visit to Wiskit Hill and all the circumstances connected with it. He pointed out that though the oboist had gone frequently to the Mangle House, Milly's father must always have been present at their interviews, whilst the various stories told by the witnesses about the two having been seen "walking out" all referred to one, and that the first, interview the two had had together; and they knew themselves that Milly had come out as a singer, which was the fairest confirmation of the story they could have.

His tale, and the confirmatory evidence at which he only hinted, carried the impress of simple truth upon it, and when he finished with another pathetic reference to the thing about which every villager was sensitive — namely, poverty—even Maria Bentley realised that the case was lost, for that night at any rate; for though his testimony might be something short of conclusiveness by itself, his character was so high, and his words usually so few, that when, as now, he spoke his mind, there was nobody in Slagden at any rate bold enough to gainsay him.

As he shuffled back to his seat, however, opposition sprang up from a totally new quarter; for Peter Jump the blacksmith, raising his head from his writing, suddenly declared that "that pawverty tale winna wesh, at ony rate; they'n tew paand a wik cumin' in if they'n a penny;" and before the minister could interpose, the

crestfallen Maria blurted out, "If it isna chappin' wi' wed men it's hypocrisy, an' that's wur! Nat Scholes is th' richest mon i' Slagdin. It's no' pawverty; it's lyin', that's wot it is!" The chairman raised his hand to check her, and, when she had done, the hitherto silent Circuit steward rose suddenly to his feet, remarking, amid stares of stupid amazement, "I think I can throw a little light upon that—if you will allow me."

The minister demurred, doubting whether such evidence was admissible; but Saul bawled out, "Go on, brother!" and the others murmured eager assent.

"I don't in the least wonder at the remarks that have been made about the poverty of the Scholeses," he began, "and let me say at once that, mysterious as it may appear to you, it is all true. Now that I know both sides of the matter, I marvel that they have not starved themselves to death."

Peter Jump began to shake his head, Maria had a sceptical sneer on her lips, but the rest were only too eager for him to proceed.

"And now let me tell my side of the story. About nine years ago, when I was at the head office in Manchester, a country youth came in as junior clerk. He was a nice lad, though rather shy, and soon got into favour. He proved smart and painstaking, and we all prophesied for him a successful career. Presently, however, a number of provoking defalcations began to be discovered,

and after much careful investigation they were traced to this new-comer. We all refused to believe it. But the evidence seemed irresistible, and so he was carpeted, and lost all the sympathy he had previously gained, by braving it out and denying everything. Well, it doesn't do a bank any good when these things occur, and so it was decided to give him every chance and encouragement to confess, or at any rate replace the money —altogether some six hundred pounds. We could not see that he could have done it by himself, and we wanted to reach his confederates. The old manager talked to him very kindly, but he stuck to his innocence in spite of everything, and all persuasion was in vain. Then we sent for his old father, and when I saw him—for it was my duty to receive him and conduct him to the manager—my heart sank within me. I could see that he was a man of high character, though a countryman, and that he had got his death-blow. The meeting between father and son will live in my memory to my dying day. The father proved as stubborn as the boy, but when the evidence was shown to him, he—well, he fainted and dropped on the office floor. When he came round, he went on his knees to the manager and pleaded in a way that would have melted a heart of marble. Well, to make a long story short, it was agreed at last that the lad should not be prosecuted, but that they should pay back the deficiency. The old fellow had no ready money, or very little, but he made such an

impression on my chiefs that they consented that if he could pay the half at once he should be allowed to replace the rest by instalments. Well, the half was paid, I learnt recently, by the sale of the old man's farm stock and implements and, in fact, all he had. The boy, I found, was making a shifty sort of living selling papers in Manchester. In time, of course, the thing went out of my mind, until I was appointed manager at Aldershaw, and then I found that a shabbily dressed female, looking half starved and very much frightened, came regularly to the bank to pay another instalment of that very debt. I guessed how hardly it was got, for she brought it in small money, shillings and even sixpences, paying as a rule about five pounds a month. Well——" But at this moment several choky voices cried out gaspingly, "Whoa wur it? Whoa wur it?"

"Gentlemen," said the minister, with misty eyes, "let the speaker finish."

"Well, three weeks ago a strange thing happened. An old servant of the bank in town fell down a grid as he was going home from some not very sober party, and was so seriously injured that his life was despaired of. He sent for me, and there on his dying bed unfolded to me the cunning and wicked scheme by which for years he had defrauded the bank. He had taken the money for which the youth had been dismissed, and much more. Well, gentlemen, I set to work at once to find the injured youth—now, of course,

a man. I found that the money had almost all been repaid by the father and sister, and that they were struggling in the direst poverty to discharge the liability they had incurred. That old man was Mr. Nathaniel Scholes, and that bl—bl—blessed daughter was the young woman you have been trying here to-night."

Amid the intensest silence the manager dropped into his chair, the minister covered his face with his hands, and sniffs and suppressed sobs began to be heard. Then there was a struggling groan, a shuffle of feet, and Maria Bentley, fighting as for breath, and clenching her hands and nipping her eyes together, fought down presently an emotion that was choking her, and gasped out, "May God forgive a wicked woman!"

Half an hour later Milly sat with quiet, downcast look in her father's chair at the Mangle House, Jesse Bentley on one side and her long-absent brother Josiah on the other, whilst the minister and the Circuit steward and all the best-known Slagdenites filled the room. The preacher made a little speech, strangely confused and inconsequent for so practised a speaker. But Milly held down her head. Confessions, apologies, explanations, and glowing eulogies were offered to the new heroine, but she seemed as though she did not hear.

Maria Bentley, shrinking in a new shame into the back corner, called across the room that she was not fit to black her clogs, and Dan Stott gave her a little nip on the arm and declared

that "Jinny Linn wur a foo' to her"; but still the mangle girl had nothing to say. One or two of the little groups started tentative conversations, but it was not a success; everybody was waiting for and watching the chief figure in the scene, wondering why she did not raise her head and talk. Presently, however, she lifted her eyes suffused with moist tears and soft, gracious light, and fixed them on the Circuit plan hanging on the opposite wall. Everybody followed her glance; she could not read it at that distance, but she seemed to see some wondrous beauty and interest in it. Then she flushed a little, tender tears began to steal down her cheeks, she fought with some rising emotion for a moment, and then, with a blush and a tender smile, she said, "Mi muther wur rare an' fain when his name wur at th' top o' th' plan," and then suddenly dropping her voice almost into a whisper, she continued, "*Bud it's ta'n a bit o' keepin' theer.*"

CHAPTER XXIV

A DOUBLE WEDDING

WHEN the Super came to think over the matter afterwards, he was not quite sure that the spirit and motive of Milly's struggle were as beautiful and commendable as they had appeared on the night of the leaders' meeting. It seemed to him that her pride in her father's high reputation and his place on the Circuit plan was a little strained, whilst the struggles she had made and the sorrows she had borne, rather than divulge their dreadful secret, were things not without alloy. He could not help feeling that if she had allowed her circumstances to be known she might have escaped some of her bitterest trials, and have received the assistance which she so richly deserved.

But the Slagdenites had no such misgivings, and would probably not have understood if he had described them; it would have been worse than useless, in fact, for him to have explained. They understood Milly perfectly, and to them her conduct was simply ideal. It would have been waste of breath to have argued that her brother's disgrace did not in the least affect her father's

name, and equally useless to point out that the pride that struggled to conceal poverty might easily be pushed to extremes. To them it was the highest virtue and the purest religion. Poverty is the poor man's devil, and living as the villagers did in hard times and a decaying hamlet, haunted ever by the shadow of the grim demon, they entered deeply into old Nat's and his daughter's feelings, and had nothing for them but glowing admiration. They measured exactly the degree of horror with which the sometime farmer contemplated the possibility of sullying a name that had become so precious and fragrant, and comprehended perfectly why, in spite of his innocence, the well-nigh forgotten son had kept carefully away from the village until the day when he could look his neighbours in the face. They appreciated all that it must have cost the Scholeses to so effectually conceal the great dishonour, and the pride that made them endure in silence suspicion, misrepresentation, and so flagrant a disgrace as the stang riding, rather than admit a poverty which could only be explained by the laying bare of their terrible secret.

Little by little the details came out. The long-absent Josiah, whose very occasional visits to his relatives were always made after dark, and had given rise to some of the suspicions for which Milly had suffered so keenly, had barely kept himself in his precarious newsvending; but when his innocence was made clear, though he was now too old to be taken back, unless he very much

wished it, the bank people made such reparation as they could by a substantial monetary compensation. The money paid by Milly and her father, with interest at the rate of five per cent., was placed to Nat's account at the bank, and the undisguised joy of the villagers was complete when it was known that the old herbalist would end his days as a capitalist.

A feeling the Slagdenites could not have explained made them oddly shy of Milly, but they more than made up for it by the way in which they lionised Josiah. David Brooks was the only one of the persecutors of Milly who kept aloof, but popular opinion was too strong for him, and when the oboist came over from Wiskit Hill, and, after a clumsy apology for the assault, presented David with a nonsuch piccolo as an atonement, there was nothing for it but to fall into line with the rest; and so, when it was known that Milly had sold the mangle and her goodwill, together with the stock of herbs, to old "Nan o' th' moor-edge" previous to her marriage, he sent his sister Tizzy to ask Maria Bentley to request the happy Jesse to explain to Milly that she could have one of his empty houses on her own terms.

In the happy days that followed, Milly grew fairer every hour under the eyes of the proud and rejoicing villagers. Her flesh returned as by magic, and her graceful limbs became rounded and youthful once more; whilst the new dresses she procured somewhere helped to make her the

prettiest figure save one in Slagden. She was only too proud to be second to pretty Emma Cunliffe, and as there were already signs that sooner or later her heart's desire would be realised in the union of the village beauty with her brother Josiah, Milly was more than content.

The autumn that followed that unusually dry summer proved damp and humid, and Slagden, boasting only the most primitive sanitary arrangements, fell a victim to the prevalent fever, little Tet Swindells being one of the first to go down. Unhappily, however, Tet did not recover like the rest; her disorder was of the kind called "Slow," and in Tet's case, at least, it amply justified its name. More than once she was pronounced out of danger, but she never attempted to rise from her bed, and there was always a subsequent relapse.

Milly's wedding-day was fixed at last, and Slagden prepared to do fitting honour to the great occasion. The "chapel i'th ginnel" was not licensed; for, sturdy Nonconformists though the villagers were, they would not have deemed themselves properly married anywhere but at the parish church. That noble old building was decorated for the ceremony, and though autumn flowers were not so easy to obtain a generation ago as they are now, it was the secret ambition of the chapel people to make the display a little more brilliant than that on the marriage of the vicar's niece, which took place in flowery June.

The Super, who for all his moralising scruples took care to tell Milly's story wherever he went

in the Circuit, sent a beautifully bound copy of Wesley's Hymns, and the Circuit steward from the bank a piece of silver-plate, much too grand for the modest aspirations of bride and bridegroom, but which the Slagdenites inspected with gloating eyes.

The day dawned as brightly as though it had been midsummer, and though in the early morning there had been the first nip of frost, everybody declared that the day was "made fo' th' job."

Without arrangement, but in obedience to a common instinct, the village senators gave the gable-end a wide berth that morning, and the Mangle House and its precincts were given up entirely to women. The ceremony was fixed for half-past eleven in the forenoon, but a little after nine a message came to the bride from little Tet, and Milly, to everybody's astonishment, began to dress at once, and sent word to the happy but nervous groom that he must hurry up. About half-past ten a little group of women began to make their way to the church to get good seats, and, as they passed the schoolmaster's cottage, their voices dropped almost to whispers, for it was known that Tet was much worse.

And then appeared a most extraordinary spectacle; for a little before eleven the bride and bridegroom were seen on the old road, dressed in every bit of their wedding finery, and walking arm in arm towards the schoolmaster's house. The Slagden women were scandalised, but it was

no use arguing with Milly Scholes, and they had to content themselves with staring after the gay couple, and then devoting themselves to an inspection of the bridesmaid and the wedding gifts.

Meanwhile the bride and her future husband had reached Saul's residence, and were mutely conducted upstairs into the sickroom.

Poor Tet, worn almost to a skeleton, sat bolstered up in bed, evidently expecting her visitors. Her haggard little face seemed to have worn almost away, leaving nothing but two immense black eyes, one of which was partly veiled by a drooping lid. The inconsiderate bride, reckless of crumpled frills and everything else, flung her arms round her little friend and burst into tears. Tet, leaning her face against the glowing cheeks of her friend, lifted a long, contented sigh, and received the impetuous kisses almost as eagerly as they were given. In the midst of these tender exchanges, however, the sufferer's strength seemed suddenly to fail, and Milly put her gently back on the pillow and watched her intently. Presently those great eyes opened, and Milly, to awaken a momentary interest, stepped back to fulfil a promise and show herself and her clothes. But poor Tet was too far gone: she tried to look, but her eyes were glazing, and even when Jesse, with a pathetic droop in the corner of his mouth, went and stood by his sweetheart's side in all his grand livery, the sufferer gave no sign. A terrible

fear came into Milly's face, but she dare not move, and a deathly silence fell upon them. The two, with poor old Saul stifling his sobs behind them, watched the sick one for some moments, and as she gave no sign of life and her eyes were fixed, the bride was stepping, with white face, up to the bedside, when a faint, husky whisper of a voice startled her by saying, "Aw allis towd thi sa, didn't Aw?"

"Towd me wot, luv? What?" cried the choking Milly.

"As Aw should be marrit afoor thi; an' Aw shall, Aw sh——" and with a convulsive shiver and a last fling of her wan arms, she cried, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!" and as Milly snatched at and held the thin but pretty hands, Tet's soul passed to its bridal, and there was peace.

They were a very grave couple that stood that day at the altar—the death-chamber had cast its shadow upon them; but to Milly, listening to the solemn words of the service, the memory of the recent parting had given a new meaning and significance to the act she was performing. She could not but be thankful that her crippled little friend had escaped a world she was not equal to, and she felt that the scene in which she had just participated consecrated the ceremony in the church as nothing else could have done. She made the responses in tremulous but deeply earnest tones, and as she walked down the aisle the spectators missed the bright

blushes of the happy bride, and saw in their place the face of a nun coming from her everlasting bridal, or a saint just fresh from a vision of God.

Tet's death cast a sort of gloom over the festivities also, and the usually sparkling bride sat like one in a dream, and answered only when spoken to. The breakfast was held in the long room of the "Dog and Gun," the landlord absolutely refusing to take denial; and, besides, there was no room but the Sunday school that was available. The visitors divining something of Milly's mood, thought it best to let her alone, and did their best to please her by showing special honour to old Nat. The old man, however, was absent too, and his partial loss of speech — now, alas! likely to be permanent— made him the less anxious for conversation. It was difficult, therefore, to entertain him, and the courteous guests were somewhat at a loss to know what to do. At the close of the meal some attempt was made at "toasts," and a number of more or less appropriate speeches were made. Old Nat, though he listened eagerly, did not utter a word. Suddenly, however, the old man looked round for his inseparable sticks, and began slowly to totter towards his daughter. Every eye was turned towards him, and every tongue still, as Seth Pollit went and took the old man's hand. Slowly he hobbled down the long row of guests, struggling painfully with his lack of locomotory powers, and suppressing with difficulty some inward

emotion. He stopped behind his daughter, placed his hands on the shoulders of the happy pair, paused a moment in evident prayer, and then said—

"The Lord bless you and keep you: the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace."

It seemed as though he had done, and heads which had dropped as in prayer were being raised, when he took his hand from Jesse, and placing it with the other, on the head now, and not on the shoulder, of his daughter, he went on in husky, struggling tones—

"The Lord deal kindly with thee, as thou hast dealt with the dead—and with me."

THE END

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